

**ALONG
WEST COAST**

AVENGERS
WEST COAST

AWC#103

MV1 *Earth's Mightiest Heroes!*



COMICS

#103

To combat those threats against which no hero could stand alone, Earth's Mightiest Heroes forged a covenant to unite in battle to protect all mankind. Now, from a second base of operations, a new chapter in their legend is being written.

Van Plexico presents: ***Avengers West Coast!***

"Whackos Assemble!"

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*"**Avengers Assemble!!!**" cried Hawkeye, with bow raised above head as he stood at the back of the courtyard of Avengers Compound. Echoes could be heard as the time-honored call went forth. "semble... semble... semble..."*

Mockingbird, with hands on hips, lived up to her code-name. "Verrrrrrry impressive Mister Hawkeye, sir! But what was that supposed to prove, other than that the grounds produce a great echo? I mean, I already knew you had a great set of lungs. Why do you think I married you?"

Hawkeye turned back to his spanking-new bride and grinned broadly. "I'd assumed it was because you were hopelessly smitten with my boyish good looks and manly

charm, Bobbi! Anyway, whats wrong with giving the ol' team call to assemble?

"Not a thing." retorted Mocky "If you ignore the fact that we're the only ones on the whole estate!"

Hawkeye moved over and slipped an arm around Mocky, she returned the favor and the pair walked inside the mansion proper. "It's not an estate, honey- It's a compound! With California real estate costing what it does, there is a big difference!"

"Don't change the subject! We have enough land and buildings here to open a resort, but the only Avengers in sight are 'Thee and me'..."

Hawkeye broke from his reverie. He was sitting on a patio chair on that same courtyard. The cool air blowing off the pacific made the early evening temperature inviting, so Hawk had moved outside to finish his work.

He rememberd that not so long ago day*, like it were yesterday, and despite the fact Bobbi was no longer with him, the memory brought a smile to his lips.

*that day, being WCA LS #1-- Scott

He sighed "Well, it was different circumstances than I have now, but Bobbi would still be right if she were saying it now. I've got a fully equiped HQ, but no one to fill it."

He pored over the files, once again, on his Avengers-supplied personal laptop. Trying to come up with six names to fill a roster. After several more minutes he threw his hands in the air. "Aww, the heck wth it. Might as well make it a party and invite everybody. Let em sort it out themselves who'll be on the team." he grinned to himself. "While I'm at it, why not revive an old tradition too...?"

His hands started typing again with a clackety sound.

The next day.

Hakweye's call to Assemble went out all over the world. Via E-mail, fax, telephone, and communicard. Within 24 hours, all former Avengers West possible had been contacted.

Of course, for certain members, special consideration had been given. Those of the original West Coast team had been contacted personally. So, the night before the big BBQ, Hawkeye had asked them to meet him at the compound.

Jim Rhodes was the first to arrive that evening, given that he lived the closest to the Compound of any of the other founders. He and Hawkeye conversed on the front steps, waiting for the others to arrive.

"I don't get it Hawkeye." said Rhodey "Why do you need me here? You know I dropped out of the Super-hero gig a while back. I'm not much use to the Avengers as just plain old Jim Rhodes."

Hawkeye nodded. "Sure Jim, I know. I'm not asking you to resume a super-hero career either. I just felt that since you were an original member*, I wanted to show you the respect of an invitation. In any case it ought to be fun tomorrow seeing some of the old gang tomorrow, dont you think?"

*Rhodey wore the Iron Man armor in the WCA limited series, in addtion to joining as War Machine much later in the run. --Nostalgic Scott

Rhodey grinned "Yeah, I suppose it might be fun at that."

"Besides," said Hawkeye "I've got something in mind for you that dosen't require super-powers. Things are gonna be run differently this time. But, lets save that till the others arrive."

As if on cue, a streak of light crossed the early evening sky. It came towards the pair on the stairs. And so, Wonder Man arrived at the Compound, carrying a giggling Tigra in his arms.

"Hello boys," purred Tigra as she lightly dropped to her feet. "Nice to see you all again."

"Same here!" said Hawk and Rhodey together.

Hawkeye offered his hand to Wonder Man "Glad you and Tigra could make it, Simon."

Wonder Man nodded and took Hawk's hand, his face a stone mask. "Not doing much else these days Clint." he said, rather dryly.

Hawk squinted at him, taken a bit off-guard by his old friend and colleagues attitude. "Er, everything OK, Wondy?"

Wonder Man gave a thin-lipped smile, with no emotion behind it. "Oh yeah... everything's just peachy. Can we get this over with? I've got to get back to New York." he walked into the Mansion, leaving three very bewildered Avengers on the steps.

"What the heck was that?*" said Hawk, looking at Tigra

*You know what's eating Wondy, if you've been reading Neil Gow's Scarlet Witch LS! --MV1 pluggin' Scott

Tigra shrugged "I couldnt tell you Clint. I tried chatting with him on the flight over, I havent seen Simon in so long, but all I got were short one word answers."

"Well, whatever the problem is, it'll have to wait till later. We got business to discuss. C'mon in Avengers."

Tigra and Rhodey follwed Hawkeye inside to the dining room, where a large dinner had been set up for the occasion by the Compound kitchen staff.

Elsewhere...

A darkened room somewhere. Only dimly lit, enough so that all of the occupants at the table in the center of the room can see each other. At the head of the table stand a woman whose facial features and even entire body are masked by long flowing robes. She is the **Crimson Cowl** and with her are the new **Masters of Evil!**

"So," said the Cowl "It has been heard through the grapevine that the Avengers are once again setting up shop in Los Angeles. Not only that, but *Hawkeye* is going to lead them!"

"I don't get it." said Man-Killer "what do the Avengers have to do with us?"

"Fool!" shouted the Cowl "The Avengers have always been the enemy of the Masters of Evil! We have the opportunity to strike against them while they are still in the stages of setting up. They will be off balance and easy to deal with. Then, I will have my *ultimate* revenge against Hawkeye!"

Klaw frowned "Cowl, this sounds like a personal vendetta against Hawkeye to me. I had thought you were more professional than that. Had I known of this, I would not have agreed to-"

"Silence!!!" shouted the Cowl "I will not have my motives questioned! Yes, I bear Hawkeye a personal grudge. He once ruined my life after all. However, Master of Sound, rest assured that we are not merely going to attack the Avengers West. I have something much more sinister in mind..."

"What is it?" asked Cyclone

The Cowl drew her robes closer about her. Her eyes narrowed. "I know we planned on breaking the Radioactive Man from the Vault*, but now, with the Avengers moving west, I have recruited a new member. And that new member is here now!"

*See Randy Lander's Vault #2 --Scott

On cue, the door opened and in stepped... the *newest* member of the Masters of Evil.

Klaw's mouth dropped open as he recognized the figure "You!!!"

We'll learn more of the Masters of Evil's plans in future issues. In the meantime, let us return to Avengers

Compound, where the dinner has broken up, and small talk has finished.

"So, Hawkeye" said Rhodey "What were you saying earlier about new plans for the Avengers West?"

Hawkeye pushed back his plate, which a servant quickly removed from the table. "Now that we're all here I can begin. The Avengers West aren't going to be run the old way. No more 'Understudy Operation' like before. This team is going to be separate and equal to the East Coasters. Cap and I have already discussed the specifics on this. It was the only way I'd agree to lead the team. Anyhow, here's the gist: I intend to set up a Founder's Committee, just like the Eackos have, to settle big time difficulties that are bound to creep up from time to time. You guys are founding members, so I want you all on that committee. That's why I wanted you here before tomorrow when everyone else shows up."

Rhodey frowned "I don't know about this, Hawkeye. Like I said earlier, I'm not in the super-hero gig anymore. I don't think it would be right for me to sit on a committee overseeing super-powered people."

"Wrong." retorted Hawk "You're perfect for the job. I know you to be a man of integrity, Jim. I also think that someone not wearing spandex on the committee will tend to be more impartial about things than the rest of us. Besides, it's not like you will have to deal in the day-to-day affairs of being an Avenger. This committee is only going to come together in crises situations."

Rhodey stroked his beard, in thought. "Well, I suppose in that light, I can help out. Provided of course you keep from having too many Crises. Alright?"

Hawkeye laughed "I'll certainly try my best to keep them to a minimum!" He looked to Tigra and Wonder Man "So, what do you two have to say about that?"

Tigra smiled and nodded. "I think its a great idea, Hawk. In fact, if you want I'll even be an active member. To help get this thing off the ground. I havent done an Avenging stint in a while."

"Great! Thats the Avengers spirit. Now, just five more members and we got ourselves a team! Simon?"

The three looked to Wonder Man. He had been silent through the whole meal. Only speaking when spoken to, and never saying more than was absolutely necessary. "Sure, Hawkeye. It sounds like you have all the bases covered. I'll be on your little team and Comittee. I'm a founder after all. Now, if thats it, I need to get back to New York." Wonder Man rose from his chair and made for the front door

Hawkeye's jaw dropped and he ran after him "Now just wait a minute, Avenger! That's *not* all! We still have to discuss whom likely candidates are going to be to fill roster slots tomorrow. I need your input Simon."

Wonder Man turned to look at Hawk. The ionic energy in his eyes burned intently. "Clint, I know you. You'll make the right descisions. Right now, I have to get back to New York." the look in his eyes told Hawk not to push this further. So Hawkeye stood there as Wonder Man walked out the front door, his belt jets sending him thundering off into the night.

"Cripes... just what the heck is going on with you, Simon Williams?" he turned to go back into the dining room. "Well, guys. I guess it's up to us."

Somewhere over the southern Nevada desert...

Wonder Man streaks eastward. Anger and frustration boiling to a frenzied pitch inside him. His roiling emotions bent on only one thought...

"Wanda..."

The Ionic Avenger's mind feels tormented... How much has he gone through in his so-called 'life'? Guilty of

embezzlement. Then, agreeing to join the Masters of Evil and becoming Wonder Man* in a plot to destroy the Avengers. Then, turning on his erstwhile allies and paying the ultimate price for it. Death.

*Don't suppose anyone out there has ever read Avengers #9? --Scott

But that wasn't the end of Simon Williams' story. No, he was resurrected by the Black Talon as a mindless zombie, once again a pawn against the Avengers. But he remembered the man he once was and lived again. Only to find out that his brother Eric, never a person of sterling morals, had fallen completely from grace and become the super-villain Grim Reaper.

Then Simon met possibly the most remarkable person to ever enter his life. Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch. A woman, whom when Simon finally met her, was already married to the android Vision, whose brain wave patterns were copied from Simon's very own. Simon loved Wanda despite his best efforts not to. Knowing that she loved a robotic copy of himself.

Keeping his feelings unspoken, he suffered in silence. Through many years as teammates with both Wanda and Vision, they were even together when his brother, the Reaper died.*

*Vision and Scarlet Witch LS #2 --Scott

Later, Wanda and Vision joined the team and Vision was captured by an international conspiracy and completely dismantled.* Simon, saw this as his chance to finally be with Wanda, but she spurned his every advance, feeling Simon, who would not give his brain waves to help restore the Vision, was to blame for his death.

*AWC #42 --Scott

Eventually the old wounds healed and they became teammates and friends once again. The West Coast Avengers

folded and Iron Man had an idea for a new team: Force Works. Simon and Wanda both joined. On their first mission, Simon attacked an invading Kree ship in orbit.* Destroying the ship, but caught in its explosion, Wonder Man was dead once again.

*Force Works #1 --Harried Scott

So would seem to be the end of Simon Williams. But it was not to be so. Long time friend and teammate, Hank McCoy aka the Beast, came to the Avengers seeking help to find the scattered ionic particles that he believed still contained the essence of Wonder Man.* Together with Dr. Henry Pym, they devised a plan to go into space and collect the scattered particles and bring Simon to life. The plan worked and once again, Wonder Man lived!

*Avengers 403-406 --Scott (again)

So, once again Simon Williams was among the living. Wanda was there with him, as was the Vision. But Wanda still spurned him and the Vision knew Simon to be a rival for Wanda's affections. The two clashed over this, with Wanda stating she was not a prize to be won. A few days later she left the team, stating she needed time away from the Avengers to sort her life out. Not telling anyone where she went.

Simon's reverie brings him back to the present. No matter what, he decides, he will wait for Wanda to return to Avengers Mansion. When she does, he will declare his love for her once and for all... and he *knows* that this time, things will work out between she and he. It *has* to!

We watch this man of ions fly across the country, having just examined his psyche. A man twice dead and born again. A man spurned by the one woman he has ever loved. A man whose own brother became a super-criminal and believed him to an obscene mockery of the 'real' Simon

Williams. As we examine his psyche, might we not judge it now to be extremely fragile?

And, if we look into those ionic furnaces he has for eyes, might we not detect a hint of.... *madness*?

The next day, at Avengers Compound.

"Geez Cockeye, I gotta admit, you put on quite a spread here today."

Ben Grimm, the ever-lovin blue-eyed Thing, lounged back on a patio chair as Hawkeye, with a 'Kiss the Barbequer' apron on, preped the grill for the steaks that would come shortly.

"Well Benjy, I know all you people didnt come here just to bathe in the glow of my good looks. I needed an incentive to get you here"

Jim Hammond walked by just then and nodded a greeting to Hawk and Ben.

"Hiya Torchie!" said Hawkeye who was looking back and forth between Jim and the grill. "Um, I don't suppose you could help me out here?"

Hammond stopped dead in his tracks and simply arched an eyebrow at Hawk.

Hawkeye stared at Jim for a couple of seconds before he realized his mistake and turned three shades of crimson. "Oooo... ah, What I meant was, 'Could you hand me the lighter fluid?'"

Hammond, smiled thinly "Oh, of course, Hawkeye." he handed him the fluid, then curtly walked on his way.

"Haw haw haw!" laughed the Thing "That's the first time I ever saw ol' *Purple* puss turn *red*!" he laughed again as Hawkeye glared at him and puffed on his cigar. "Whatta show!"

Looking elsewhere around the verranda where the bbq was taking place, we see a Who's Who of former West Coast

Avengers. Standing in various pockets of conversation are: Jim Rhodes, Tigra, Iron Man, Firebird, Yellowjacket, Wasp, Vision, USAgent, Jim Hammond, Quicksilver, Spider-Woman, and the Living Lightning.

If we move about the the throng, we can hear various snippets of conversations...

"...Yeah, Rhodes Air isnt doing as well as I'd like, but it's paying the bills..."

"...and I'm done hanging out with the aboriginies, at least for the present. I've officially joined the team already...."

"...Well, as Iron Man, I'm pretty tied up with Stark Enterprises's problems at present, but who knows what'll happen down the road..."

"...I'm flattered Hawkeye invited me, since I was never an official part of the team. I guess he just wanted to be sure not to forget me this time. Nice of him, but I'm quite happy with my role in the Champions for right now..."

"...So anyway, I decided to go back to being Yellowjacket after that. This persona no longer holds any fear over me. Still, if it wasnt for you, Bonita, I wouldnt be in this costume today..."

"...I'm not interested in joining right now, but let it never be said that Janet Van Dyne failed to attend a party she was personally invited to..."

"...In the end it turned out Mockingbird wasn't there at all. It was just a ruse by Mephisto to get me, Hawk, the Swordsman and Strange into his domain, so that he could possess our souls. Oop, here comes Hawk now, we'd better change the subject..."

"...So, I'm not really sure what's going on with Heroes for Hire right now. I'm just in a wait and see mode..."

"...Anyhow, as much as Rachel and I loved Newport Beach, I saw Houston as an ideal place for us to start over.

In fact, today just happens to be my final appearance as Spider-Woman for the foreseeable future..."

"...Well, I haven't been studying as much as I should. With the Avengers and Force Works gone, there's been more than enough criminal activity to keep the Living Lightning busy. But now that their back, and the Champions too, maybe I can get back into college life at USC a little more..."

And so it goes, small talk mostly, as old friends get reacquainted. However elsewhere at the Compound...

He crouches atop the wall, in the shadows of the foliage which surrounds the Compound. He too was summoned to this gathering of heroes, but he has decided only to observe. To gain what information is necessary from the event and then depart. For the **Moon Knight** no longer joins any team. His fight against the darkness of evil is a fight he must face alone.

And, somewhat farther away than the Moon Knight is from the gathering... In the forests of Transia...

Wanda Maximoff joins in the search for a lost gypsy child.* She was summoned to the gathering, but not having any contact with the Avengers, she is unaware of this. So, the meeting goes on without her...

*See Scarlet Witch LS #6 (still on sale!) for details. --Scott

Meanwhile, back at the Compound, things are not so pleasant as they at first seemed.

"It is all your fault, android, that my sister has gone missing!"

The Vision stood facing Quicksilver, his face as dispassionate as a wall of stone, yet underneath the emotions were in a churning turmoil. Still, he responded to the mutant speedster's accusations in a calm, computer precise voice. *"I do not understand what you are inferring Quicksilver. Wanda left the Mansion of her own volition. She*

stated needing time away from the Avengers. I sought neither to persuade nor dissuade her from this course of action."

Quicksilver's face was livid with rage as he screamed. "Fool! It was your unholy love for her that drove her away! What right has an android to love a woman?"

The stone mask of the Vision broke. *"What right have you, mutant, to tell me whom I can and cannot love?"*

"You spit out the word mutant as if it were something low and base! Well, when I'm done with you. thats not all you'll spit out!" Quicksilver made a threatening step toward the Vision.

"I say mutant, the same way you say android. And if you seek to attack me, be certain I will defend myself!" The Vision stepped back, taking a defensive stance, his cape swirling about him.

Suddenly, a repulsor blast shot between the two potential combatants. Hawkeye, with an arrow nocked, stood with Iron Man in front of Vision and Quicksilver.

"Thats enough!" said Hawkeye "Both of you! This is a friendly gathering, and we are *all* Avengers here. If you two can't put aside your differences, then you can both leave."

Iron Man broke in "Right, Clint. The days when Avengers fight among themselves is over, if I can do anything about it. And I think both you you know I can!"

Both the Vision and Quicksilver looked appropriately mortified.*

*Thats all of Quickie and Vizh for now, but if you want to see more, check out Neil Gow's "Brothers in Arms" LS, coming soon! --Scott (Man, Neil sure is getting a lot of plugs in this book!)

"Now" said Hawk "Enough of this. Lets get back to having fun. Agreed?" They both nodded. Quicksilver moved off to

another part of the backyard.

"My apologies, Hawkeye. I let him goad me into a violent reaction. After all these years, I should know better." Then he too walked off.

Iron Man looked sidelong at Hawkeye. "Well, I'll say this Clint. You certainly know how to throw a party."

Later, Hawkeye Rhodey and Tigra have gathered in the Main Assembly room, to discuss the days events. They have spent the last two hours going over potential members.

"So," said Tigra, poring over her viewscreen. "here's what we have: Rhodey is out of the super-hero game." Rhodey nods in agreement, as if to finally confirm it. "Simon is on the team... if he ever comes back from New York. Mockingbird is, uh... well..."

Hawkeye gave Tigra a reassuring smile. "It's okay Greer. Shes gone. I'm moving on with my life now."

Tigra cleared her throat "Anyhow... Yellowjacket is on the East Coast team. Iron Man has his hands full keeping Stark Enterprises villain-free.. Firebird is busy with the Champions these days. The Thing's with the FF, of course. Moon Knight was a no-show. Hardly suprising, eh? Wasp isnt intrested in Avenging right now, having recently left the East Coast team. Wanda didnt show up. We still dont know where she is, exactly."

"We dont know at all." offered Rhodey

Tigra didnt miss a beat "Vision is serving with the Eackos. The USAgent is-"

"The USAgent is on the team. And he'll have words with anyone who says otherwise."

The three founders looked to the door of the Assembly room. There stood the USAgent, with arms firmly folded across his chest. "Is that a problem for anyone?" he said.

Tigra and Rhodey looked to Hawkeye. Hawkeye in turn looked to the Agent. "Not a problem Jack. In fact I was hoping we hadn't heard the last of you when you left early."

The Agent nodded. "I had some personal stuff to take care of.* So, am I on the team, or not?"

*Remind me to tell you about it sometime. --Tale-telling Scott

"You're on." said Hawkeye. "As long as Jim and Tigra have no objections, of course."

"None here." said Tigra. "I like having a man with big shoulders and a square jaw on the team." she purred.

Rhodey cleared his throat "Well, my reasons are different from yours, Tigra, but you obviously can use the Agent's power on the team."

"So, that settles it." said Hawk. "You're in buddy. Welcome to the team!"

USAgent cracked a smile. Excellent. I was really hoping I wouldn't have to bust some heads." he had a seat at the table. "Now, before I so rudely interrupted..."

Tigra took her cue. "Right. On to Jim Hammond. He's busy running Heroes for Hire. That group is in a state of flux right now, but either way, without his flame powers, he most likely won't be joining anytime soon. Then there's Quicksilver. Um... well, Mr. Hothead left before we could find out about him one way or another."

"Doesn't matter" said Hawk. "I don't want him if he's gonna go back to acting like a big jerk all the time again."

"Ooooooooookay... next is Spider-Woman. She's gone back to Houston already. Apparently today was her Super-hero swansong."

Hawkeye looked dejected. "I was really hoping to get her, too..."

"We'll have to make do, Clint. The Living Lightening is still too busy with college, although he said he'd fill in as a reservist. Machine Man... hey, where was he today?"

"Who knows?" said the Agent. "The tin-can was barely an Avenger anyway."

"I suppose..." said Tigra "Well, that leaves us with Darkhawk, who is, well... dead.* So, boss. How are we set?

It happened in the already classic New Warriors Annual #5
--Classic Scott

Hawkeye frowned "It's me, You Tigra, the Agent, and maybe... Wonder Man. Kind of a 'Hawk's Kooky Quartet' I suppose." He smirked. "We'll have to make due for the present. I'll wait to hold a press conference until I explore a couple of other possibilities I have in mind." He picked up the gavel "But until then, I guess this meetings adjourned."

"Hold it Barton." said the Agent. "You're forgetting something."

"I am?" Hawkeye looked puzzled, then he caught on. "Oh, right Jack. Tell ya what. Why don't you do the honors?"

"Me?" the Agent looked suprised. "Well, you're chairperson, but if you say so."

All four Avengers stood as the Agent lifted a fist in the air and shouted the Call.

"Avengers Assemble!"

Hawkeye banged the gavel "Meeting adjourned!"

Next Month: Hawkeye searches for other possibilities to fill the roster. More on the Wonder Man situation. And just what are the Masters of Evil up to? Seeya in thirty, True Believer!

Send all letters to Scott

This is it folks, the comic you've been waiting months for is finally out!

And now its you're chance to respond! Let's hear what you, the reader, liked (or disliked) about this issue! We're just dying to here!

--Scott Chamberlain

AWC#104

MV1 *Hawkeye! Tigra! USAgent! Wonder Man!*



COMICS

#104

To combat those threats against which no hero could stand alone, Earth's Mightiest Heroes forged a covenant to unite in battle to protect all mankind. Now, from a second base of operations, a new chapter in their legend is being written.

Van Plexico presents..... *Avengers West Coast!*

"Recruitment Drive"

Scott Chamberlain: Story

Chris Luna: Scans

Van Plexico: EIC

Main Assembly Room, Avengers West Compound. 8:00 A.M., today!

Hawkeye pounded the gavel on the table. "This meeting of the Avengers is now in session."

Clockwise around the table from Hawkeye sat Greer Nelson. Tigra, the were-woman. Gifted with the abilities of a cat, as well as super-human strength and agility.

Next was Miguel Santos, the Living Lightning. Avengers West reservist, able to transform his body into a living bolt of lightning, hence the name.

Finally, the USAgent. A man who once wore the costume of Captain America, now a hero in his own right. Possessing

super-human strength and incredible endurance. Also armed with "photon shields" on each wrist, which could be used as shields, or hurled at enemies as force weapons.

Hawkeye sat and began speaking, nodding to Lightning. "Glad you could make it, Miguel."

"Hey, no problem. I'm always there when the Avengers really need me."

"Well," said Hawkeye "We don't need you for your power this time, just an extra set of eyes to help evaluate the new talent were going to be seeing later."

The Agent grunted "I dunno Barton. You really think anyone worth their salt is going to show up here today? I'm not sure this recruitment idea is worth the bother."

"Hey!" said Tigra "I joined the Avengers as the result of a recruitment drive you know!* I think its a great idea."

*She did! See Avengers 211 for details! --Recruiter Scott

Hawk nodded. "And you've proven that these things can work, Greer. You've been a fine Avenger." Hawkeye looked at the Agent. "Besides Jack, we need the manpower. Especially with Wonder Man still M.I.A.* The three of us cant hold the fort by ourselves." He shrugged "Now, don't get me wrong, I know there are probably going to be a lot of poseurs out there, just looking to get a few kicks at our expense. That's where you all come in. I need all of you sharp to help me weed out the real talent from the wannabees."

*See Neil Gow's Scarlet Witch #8 to see why Wondy's not with the team. --Scott

The Agent frowned "Well, I still don't like it, but we don't seem to have a whole lot of choice. When does this all start?"

Hawkeye looked at his watch. "We open the gates at nine. We better get moving. Avengers Assemble to the outdoor training area!"

Elsewhere... the secret base of the *New Masters of Evil*!

The Crimson Cowl sat at the head of the table, regarding her team. Cyclone. Flying Tiger. Man Killer. Tiger Shark. Also, the shadowy figure who took up position just behind and to the left of the Cowl's seat. No one in the room could make out more than a silhouette of the figure, but they all knew what it was.

"The time has come, Masters" said the Cowl "To begin our plan to destroy the Avengers West, before they have a chance to get their feet under them. Today they hold a recruitment drive, leaving the inside of their Compound undefended." she paused "We will attack as soon as they have begun their exercises in the training area. Be ready for my call!" The Cowl rose.

"Sacre bleu!" said Cyclone, in his thick, French accent "But we are shorthanded without Ze Klaw to help us in our attack against ze Avengers...!"

The Cowl narrowed her eyes at Cyclone "Klaw is of no consequence. He is off pursuing his own agenda in Wakanda* and is therefore no longer part of this team. Not that we need him!" the Cowl indicated the shadowed figure behind her. "I'd say our new member more than makes up for his loss, wouldn't you agree?"

*See recent issues of Barry Reese's Black Panther for details of Klaw's departure. --Cross-referencing Scott

Cyclone gulped and nodded, clearly intimidated by the figure. As was the rest of the team.

The Cowl folded her arms. "Good. Now if there are no more problems, get yourself prepared. Be ready to go when I give the signal.

The training area, Avengers Compound. Later that day.

Hawkeye, Tigra, USAgent and the Living Lightning had been examining the candidates for a few hours, with little

results. Very few worthwhile candidates were in the throng. Nevertheless, the Avengers did conduct interviews with some of them...

Hawkeye looked at the man standing before him. He couldn't help rolling his eyes at the obviously home-made costume. The man was slightly overweight, a beer gut prominent. He wore a faded T-shirt, spandex pants with suspenders looped over his shoulder. A metal helmet with a small fin adorned his head. A pair of faded-white angel-looking wings were mounted, a bit crookedly, on his back.

"Who did you say you were again?" Asked Hawkeye.

"The Osprey."

Hawkeye blinked "The Osprey?" Tigra stifled a giggle.

The Osprey looped his thumbs around his suspenders, tried to stick out his chest, which made his gut more obvious, and said proudly "Yep."

"Er..." said Hawk "What are your powers?"

"I can fly..."

"I hope so, with those wings..." the Agent quipped. Tigra did giggle this time.

The Osprey demonstrated his ability. Flying around somewhat haphazardly around the group, but not flapping his wings. He landed. "I've got an anti-gravity disc strapped to my back.*"

*He got that anti-grav disc from the Wizard in FF #177! No... really! He's a real live Marvel character! --Obscure Scott

Hawkeye nodded "We'll be in touch" he lied.

So the hopeful Avengers came and went. Most of them unnoteworthy. Until...

The group saw who the next candidate was and rose in unison, shock clearly evident on their faces.

"You!" said Hawkeye. "What do you think you are doing here!?!?"

Tigra put a hand on his shoulder "Now, Hawkeye... Lets give her a fair shot. Okay?"

Hawkeye scowled and looked at the girl. "Well, what do you have to say?"

The girl was fairly short. Of obviously Japanese decent. She wore her black hair long and loose. Her costume was of yellow and black, with red zigzag design. "I guess you all know me..." she said, a bit of anger creeping in her voice. "I'm Jolt. Formerly of the Thunderbolts."

"You've got a lot of nerve coming here!" Hawkeye said. "After what you and your crowd pulled. Luckily, the Avengers stopped you*"

*The Avengers ended the Thunderbolts menace in Avengers 423 --Scott

Jolt gritted her teeth "I was duped by Zemo! I didn't know what was really going on until it was too late!" She paused "Look. All I want is a shot to redeem myself. I thought you, Hawkeye, of all people would understand. Didn't the Avengers give you a second chance once too?"

"I was never in the Masters of Evil!"

"I didn't know I was, and was never really a criminal!"

The Living Lightning leaned in close to Hawkeye. "Let's talk about this privately. I have a few things to say."

Hawkeye nodded then looked at Jolt. "Dismissed."

Jolt glared at Hawkeye a moment, then stomped angrily off.

"That went well." said Tigra.

New York City's Central Park.

Simon Williams AKA Wonder Man wandered aimlessly along one of the many paths that meandered through the

park. His mind was lost in a fog, in turmoil over the events of a couple of days ago at Avengers Mansion*.

*Again, see Neil Gow's Scarlet Witch #8 --Repetitive Scott

I've lost Wanda again... He thought. *How could this have happened? She knows I love her. She knows that the Vision can never again truly be the man she once married...* He sighed audibly. *But still she rejected me and gone off on her own to who knows where....*

Simon's shoulders sagged. He looked visibly tired. He walked along the path, not watching where he was going until he bumped into someone.

"Oh, excuse me." he mumbled.

"Simon...? Simon is that really you?"

Simon looked up at the person he had just bumped into. A slender woman with short-styled blonde hair. Recognition dawned. "Alex!*" Simon blinked, surprised. "What on earth are you doing in New York?"

*Alex Flores from Wondy's own defunct series. --Wonder Scott

Alex smiled "Pitching my story idea for a TV drama to some network executives. No luck so far though." she shrugged "I had heard you were... around again."

Simon nodded "Yeah... Good ol' back from the dead Simon 'Jesus Christ' Williams." he half-chuckled at his own joke.

Alex didn't laugh. "I heard also you came back to LA with the reformed Avengers West. Why didn't you come to see Jaime and I?"

"I was there for all of two hours Alex. I had... things to take care of back here." he paused "How is Jaime?"

"She's a holy terror. In high school now, you know. She'd love to see you, once you get back to LA." Alex put her hand on Simon's arm "I would too..."

Simon stared at the hand on his arm, blankly. "I'll drop by sometime. Look, I have to get going. It was nice seeing you again Alex. Good luck with your story." He walked off without another word.

Alex stared at his back, mouth hanging open. "Now wait just a minute!" she said, but her words were drowned out by Wonder Man's belt jets kicking in as he thundered off into the New York skyline.

Alex watched him go. A single tear rolled down her cheek. Back at Avengers Compound.

"You were way too hard on her, Hawkeye."

"No !@#\$% way, Lightning!" said the Agent "Last thing we need right now is a criminal on our team!"

"Settle down Jack." said Hawkeye "Let's hear Miguel out." he nodded to the Lightning. "Go ahead"

The Lightning cleared his throat. "Well, all I was going to say is that I understand why you have a mad on for the Masters of Evil, but I don't think that is a reason to omit Jolt from our candidates. After all Hawkeye, you let me in and I was a criminal*. Hanging out with the Pacific Overlords."

*The Living Lightning joined in AWC #74, after being a member, albeit briefly, of the Overlords. --AWC historian Scott

Hawkeye chewed his lower lip in thought a moment. "Okay Miguel, you have a point. Lets review the rest of the candidates, and make an informed decision then. Who's next, Tigra?"

Tigra pointed and grinned. "Here he comes now."

A short, pudgy, bald and rather comical man approached, wearing only what looked like a black speedo. He grinned as he drew near. "Shape *join* Avengers!" he declared loudly.

Hawkeye stifled a groan. "Shape? What are you doing here? Why aren't you at Project Pegasus?"

Shape looked down, his eyes a bit misty. "Shape's friends go bye-bye.* Shape lonely and want to join team with Purple Bowman." he nodded "Shape make *good* Avenger!"

*See Kell Carpenter's Squadron Supreme #1 to see why Shape's friends went "bye-bye" --Shapely Scott

Hawkeye sighed "Shape, I'm not sure how well you'd fit in with us." He fumbled for an excuse as to why, but came up empty. "Ah... I tell you what. We'll make you a reservist for now. You go back to the Project, and when we need you, we'll call you up. Okay?"

Shape smiled gleefully. "Yay! Shape Avenger!" He stopped and eyed Hawkeye suspiciously. "You not try to fool Shape?"

"No no!" Hawk waved his hands defensively "Honest. When we need to call in the reserves, your name will be at the top of the list!"

Shape smiled and nodded, wandering off aimlessly. "Shape Avenger!"

"Are you nuts, Barton?" the Agent asked "You made Shape an Avenger?"

"Look Agent," Hawk snapped "Hyperion and his bunch might like him, but I'm not any happier than you. Still, he is good in a fight, and we are short-handed, remember. Besides," Hawk sighed "I couldn't stand to see him cry if I said no...."

"Glad I'm not Chairperson." said Tigra

Hawkeye looked around "I wonder why they aren't here yet?"

"Who?" asked the Agent

"Swordsman and Magdalene. I extended a personal invitation for them both to try out today."

"Good idea" The Agent nodded "they both have prior Avengers experience and we both know how the Swordsman can handle himself when things get bad.*"

*See Hawkeye #1-5 for an idea of how bad it can get -- Scott

"Here comes our next candidate." said Tigra

A tall man approached. Easily over six feet, he had a longish mane of blonde hair, tied back in a pony-tail. He wore a masked costume that shimmered in the light, changing colors every time he moved. Now red, now blue, yellow, green, orange. The whole spectrum. He smiled and nodded to each of the Avengers, who gawked at the costume despite themselves.

"Nice costume." said Hawkeye "what is your code-name?"

"I call myself the Variable." he said, amicably.

"The Variable? Ooooookay. So, what are your powers? What do you do?"

"Everything."

Hawkeye frowned slightly "I'm afraid I don't understand. Could you be more specific?"

The Variable smiled "Of course. I have every power. Though only one at a time. Right now my power is super-speed. At any time I can will myself to change powers...." he seemed to hesitate a moment.

"But..." The Agent coaxed.

"But, the problem is, I have no control over what power I change to. In fact, sometimes I get a power that doesn't manifest itself in any obvious way, so its hard to tell..." "I see." said Hawkeye "Well, er... Variable. That sort of limitation could be a problem, although admittedly your power can have some definite uses in a pinch. Looking at your results from our test scores, you did very well."

"Thanks. I like to keep in shape. I've taken judo since I was eight."

Hawk nodded "Fairly impressive. We'll be in touch."

Inside the Compound, in the main computer room.

A blinding reddish light fills the room. When it fades, The Crimson Cowl and her Masters of Evil stand in the darkened room. Immediately, intruder alerts went off all over the Compound.

The Cowl indicated to her still shadowed new member. "Excellent. Your knowledge of the layout of the place was right on. Now, get to the computers and start downloading... and shut those alarms off!"

The Cowl then looked to her three teammates. "Hide yourselves. Set an ambush for when the Avengers come in. they'll never know what hit them."

Outside

In the middle of a potential candidate, alarms started going off all over the Compound.

"What the frag?" said the Agent.

A terminal popped up from the ground near Hawkeye, who looked at it's screen. "Intruder alert! Main computer room." Hawkeye looked around at all the people still on the grounds. "Tigra, Agent, with me. Lightning, you get these people cleared off the premises, post haste! Avengers Assemble!"

Hawk, the Agent and Tigra sped off for the main building. They entered, took the elevator down to sub-basement two. Arriving at the level, they approached the closed door of the computer room quietly.

"Agent" Hawkeye whispered "You take the point. Tigra, you back him up. I'll provide cover fire, if needed."

Tigra and the Agent assumed their positions. At the door, the Agent pressed the access button, and the door opened to the dark room. Quietly, the Agent ignited one of his photon shields and entered, Tigra close behind. Hawkeye stood at the door, arrow nocked.

Across the room, a lone figure stood at the computer, a wire plugged in from itself, to the mainframe.

"All right, chief." the Agent yelled "Give it up. The Avengers are here now. Don't make us take you down."

The figure unplugged itself from the computer and strode forward, its steps the sound of metal striking metal. When it was close enough, the Agent and Tigra could make out its features. In unison, they gasped out the name:

"WARTOY!!!"

Wartoy leered down at the two, Then raised a fist to slam down at them "Sayonara suckers!"

The pair of Avengers leapt out of the way of the robots strike. Hawkeye fired a blast arrow from the door at it. The arrow struck Wartoy's adamantium hide to no effect.

Wartoy looked at Hawkeye "Clint darling! How nice to see you again. Are you ready to die, sport?"

Hawk had forgotten how much like Mockingbird the robot sounded. with a cry of rage, he launched a salvo of arrows at the thing. "I'll show you what's going to die, you monstrosity!"

Suddenly, a bright red glow filled the room, blinding the Avengers. "Masters, Attack!" came the voice of the Cowl.

The Masters of Evil came out at the Avengers from all sides. Flying Tiger and Man-Killer went after the Agent. Tiger Shark and Wartoy after Tigra. Cyclone and the Cowl after Hawkeye.

Hawkeye hadn't taken the full brunt of the Cowl's blinding light trick, not being entirely in the room and therefore recovering faster. Faster than the Cowl had counted on, in fact. "You like bright lights, Cowl?" he said "Then get a load of mine!" An arrow fired off, bursting forth with a blinding flare.

"Arrrrrrrgghhhh!" said Cyclone, holing his hands over his eyes and dropping to the ground. The Cowl however was unaffected.

"I am immune to my own light, Avenger. You really think yours will stop me?" She lashed out at Hawkeye with a prehensile fold of her cape, which he barely dodged.

Hawkeye took stock of the situation. The Agent and Tigra were already down, having been caught by surprise and outnumbered to boot. Briefly, his instinct to go dive right into the Lion's Den took hold of him. Then, he rationally thought of his duties as team leader. This fight was lost. His best course of action was to retreat and call for help. Though every fiber of who he was screamed against it. Hawk fired a smoke arrow to cover his escape, and retreated up the elevator.

The Masters of Evil had the Compound.

Next Issue: The Masters of Evil in command of Avengers Compound! Hawkeye tries to assemble a team to take it back!! Be here in thirty for: "SIEGE!!!"

Send all mail to beezer@webtv.net . Be sure to include "lines" in the subject line.

From: "Barry Reese" (c_r6196@hotmail.com)

An absolute blast, Scott! A great 'return' for the WCA. I can't wait to read 104. There are a few people wandering around the MU that I've always wanted to see in the Avengers. Here's my handy-dandy 'wish-list.'

1) Angel -- I know, I know. He's tied up in X-Men. But I've always wanted to see Warren with the Avengers. Just a dream, I suppose.

2) Nomad -- Back in his old Nomad costume (not the leather outfit he's been wearing). I think maybe Cap should recommend that he join the WCA on a provisional basis until he gets his head straightened out.

3) Black Cat -- a weird one, I know, but interesting. I'm not sure she should be in the same lineup as Tigra, though.

4) Kymera -- assuming she survives the NW annual, that is. A great character.

5) Falcon -- I know, he's been an East Coaster. But Sam is a nice character who should appear more often. Let's move him out west!

Anyway, great job as always!

Barry

Great to hear from you on this, Barry! I know your fondness for the Whackos is on par with mine! On to your suggestions:

1) As you said, tied up in the X-men.

2) I'm afraid I'm not real fond of Nomad, and I'd hate to write a character I didn't like. Sorry.

3) Black Cat sure would be fun, but I think Randy over in the Spider-Man department might have something to say about her already. :)

4) Kymera... I don't know this character well enough to do it justice. Nor would I try.

5) Sam is an enjoyable character, though I'm pretty sure Matt would rather keep him for his Cap series.

thanks for your comments Barry! Keep em Coming!

I'd also sure like to hear from the rest of you! Let me know how good, or bad if that's the case, I'm doing! Seeya next month!

AWC #105, by Scott Chamberlain

(Part 1)

Writer: Scott Chamberlain

Scans: Chris Luna

EIC: Van Plexico

Avengers Compound, Palos Verdes.

"My God..." whispered Roberta Morse, AKA the Huntress, as she watched the monitors showing various scenes of destruction from around the world. "What have we done?"

Another tremor rumbled throughout the complex. Roberta gripped the arms of her seat in near panic as bits of masonry and steel fell from the ceiling. Even the reinforced construction of the sub-basements wouldn't hold much longer against the magnitude of the earthquakes which kept rippling up and down the Pacific coast.

"We... We could have stopped this!"

Roberta whipped around, startled by the sound of the voice coming from the doorway. Seeing who it was, she frowned. "Cat... I thought you were dead."

Greer Nelson, AKA the Cat stumbled into the room, eyes locked on the monitors. She was bleeding from a deep gash in the forehead. "I managed to pull myself out of the rubble. My God, Roberta! Why didn't we stop this when we had the chance?"

The Huntress shrugged. "It's too late now..." Another tremor rocked the building. A girder fell and cracked the floor with a loud crash. "Christ! We've got to get out of here, this place is a deathtrap!"

Greer looked at Roberta and laughed. Coldly, cynically. "Where will we go? Tell me that, Huntress. Where on this planet can we go? The Earth is going to hell, and you and I

are going with it." She shook her head. "No thank you, Roberta. I'm an Avenger and I'll wait for the end right here with the others."

Roberta headed for the door. She turned and looked at the Cat. "The others are dead." She had already walked out the door when the next tremor hit.

Cat screamed as the ceiling of the computer room finally gave way. Roberta, out in the better shielded hallway, ran back to the doorway. Cat lay underneath a pile of stone and metal, her skull crushed.

Macabrely, Roberta smiled. "I lost Clint to you. Now, you lose your life." She nodded, feeling justice had somehow been served as she ran to the access tunnel to the quinjet hangar.

Roberta hoped there was still a hangar left to escape from. It was the best reinforced part of the complex, so she figured her chances were good. "If I can get out of here alive... maybe I can find somewhere...someplace..." She ran.

The door to the hangar was off its hinges. Roberta knocked it aside. She stood in the hangar looking at the last remaining functional quinjet. Suddenly, a major quake hit. A fissure opened up in the floor of the hangar. Three damaged quinjets and a pristine one slid down the new incline in the floor and into the fissure. Destroyed.

"Nooooooooooooooooo!" Screamed Roberta, her last hope of survival gone. She leapt back into the access tunnel, and raced back toward the Compound. The ceiling ahead gave right before the part above her did as well. The Huntress's reflexes saved her as she leapt forward into the narrow gap between the two collapsed areas. Still, a fallen bit of concrete impacted with her shoulder. Roberta screamed in pain as she fell to the floor. Alive, but knowing the end was near. Roberta sat and awaited death.

Then a bright light filled the small gap she was in and a voice spoke. "Roberta Morse, you who call yourself the Huntress. Step into the light and join me, that you might prevent this catastrophe from happening again."

Roberta squinted into the light, trying to discern who the voice belonged to. "Who are you...?"

"The time for questions is not now." it said. "Join me, and all will be revealed to you. Refuse and you will of course die. The choice is yours."

Not needing further encouragement, Roberta picked herself painfully off the floor and walked into the light. then, another tremor hit and a world died.

Avengers Compound, Palos Verdes.

The quinjet circled once around the Compound before it would sweep out to sea and begin its approach to the cliffside hangar.

"This is Avengers quinjet Av-e-1201, requesting landing authorization. Over.

The Swordsman and Magdalene sat in the cockpit of the quinjet and awaited confirmation from the Compound.

"By the Fourth Ring!" said Magdalene. "What is going on? This is the second transmission we have sent and still no reply."

The Swordsman looped around again, watching the grounds. "Something's amiss. I know we are late, but still there should be people milling about the grounds from the tryouts."

A burst of static came across the communicator, and Hawkeye's face showed up on the viewscreen, slightly distorted from the low-output of his communicard. "Swordsy, that you?"

"Yes, Hawkeye. We've been trying to-"

"Swordsy," Hawk interrupted "get away from the Compound. The place has been-"

A laserblast shot up in front of the quinjet. Magdalene shrieked as the Swordsman executed a few evasive maneuvers. "By the Rings, Phillip. They're shooting at us!"

Hawkeye's voice came over the communicator again. "Swordsman, Magdalene. Land at the coordinates I'm transferring to the quinjet's computer. And hurry!"

Magdalene read off the coordinates and the Swordsman banked hard to the right, evading a salvo of laserbursts from the Compound. The quinjet flew off.

Main Computer Room

Wartoy stood over the computers, a fiber-optic wire connecting it to the computer. The machine's metallic features contorted into a grimace somewhat resembling a smile as it regarded the Crimson Cowl, who stood with it. "I have accessed the defensive systems. I just used them to repel a quinjet that was circling about. I can also access any of the surveillance cameras and see through them, thus eliminating the need for above ground watches. None of the Avengers can approach the Compound without alerting us and going through their own defensive systems."

"Excellent, Wartoy." The Cowl nodded. "You have accomplished much since we took control of the Compound.* Now, what of the data files? The Avengers records?"

*Last Issue --Scott

"Heavily encrypted." replied Wartoy. "I'm running permutations to break the code, but it may take a while. Say eight to ten hours."

"Make it six. Even though the West Coasters are short-handed, and reports say the East Coasters are off-world*, I'm sure Hawkeye will manage to scrounge together a team

to come after us with. Time is of the essence. We must retrieve the pertinent data as soon as possible. Then the end of the Avengers will be on the horizon." The Cowl clenched her fist. "And my ultimate revenge against Hawkeye complete!"

*See current issues of Avengers! --Assemblin' Scooter

Wartoy regarded the Cowl. "I don't see why we don't just kill our two prisoners and then hunt down Hawkeye and be done with it. I prefer fighting to all this."

The Cowl waved a dismissive hand. "Time enough for your more visceral pursuits later. Trust me, my way will provide humiliations galore for the Avengers as well as their demise. Now, continue with your work. I must see to our captives. Perhaps they might be persuaded to help us achieve our goal sooner." She walked from the room, leaving Wartoy alone.

Outside, a short distance from the Compound's perimeter.

"Good." said Hawkeye. "Reinforcements!"

Hawkeye and the Living Lightning stood watching the quinjet land in VTOL* format. The craft touched down and the Swordsman and Magdalene disembarked.

*Vertical Take Off and Landing --Aeronautical Scooter

"By the Outer Rings, Hawkeye! What is happening here?" Magdalene asked. "We were invited here by you to fill membership slots in your team and when we arrive, we get shot at!" She gripped her power lance tightly, anger clearly evident.

The Swordsman placed a restraining hand on her. "Calm yourself love. I'm quite sure Hawk has an explanation."

"You're darn right I do." said Hawk. "The Masters of Evil have taken over the Compound and they have Tigra and the Agent prisoner! But, now that you are here, along with the

Lightning, we got a team to take it back and kick their butts with."

"Do you have any sort of plan?" asked the Swordsman.

"You betcha. We go beachside, and scale the cliff. We'll sneak in through the hangar door there. Security systems there are minimal, because of its inaccessibility. We go through the access shaft and straight into the sub-basement. Hopefully, we'll be quick enough to catch them off-guard."

"How many are arrayed against us?" asked Magdalene.

The Lightning spoke up. "Well, there is the Cowl, Wartoy, Flying Tiger, Tiger-Shark, Cyclone, and Man-Killer. That's six."

"Not the best of odds, Hawkeye." said the Swordsman "Us four against the six of them, plus we have to fight through the Compound's defensive systems to get at them? I think we need more help."

"I believe we can be of assistance in this matter, Avengers."

The four Avengers looked to see who spoke. Behind them stood three figures. The Variable, Shape and Jolt.

"We're willing to pitch in." said the Variable. "If you want our help."

Hawkeye looked at the trio dubiously "Well, no offense, but this is Avengers business. We'd better handle it ourselves."

"Nooooooooo!" cried Shape. "Shape *is* Avenger!* Hawkeye say Shape Avenger!

*Shape was made a West Coast reservist last issue -- Honorary Avenger Scott

"Well, that's true..." Hawk grudgingly admitted.

Jolt spoke up. "So, what about the Variable and I? You can say 'Avengers business' all you want, but you are really short-handed! You need our help!"

Hawkeye turned the color of his costume "Look missy, Your kind of help is the kind I don't need! I find it a bit too coincidental that you show up here, then the Masters of Evil attack! For all we know, you could be part of the whole plan, waiting to stab us in the back when the chance pops up!"

"Now wait just a minute!" screamed Jolt. "I was never a part of this Masters of Evil! In fact we fought against them!*" She visibly tried to calm herself. "Look, like I said, I've fought them. I know more about their fighting styles and tactics than you do. I can be a big help, if you just let me! All I want to do is prove to you all that I'm not a criminal."

*Thunderbolts #3 --Citizen Scott

"According to our files, she did help the Avengers against the Thunderbolts* in the end, Hawkeye." said Lightning. "Maybe we ought to give her the benefit of the doubt. After all, of the five current Avengers here, only Shape didn't start out as a criminal."

"Shape *not* bad-guy!" said Shape, bobbing his head.

Hawkeye looked at each of them in turn, looking for support, but finding none. Sighing, he looked to Jolt. "All right. We'll give you a chance. But, You do exactly as I say. Understand?"

Jolt grinned and saluted "Aye Aye captain!"

"Variable, Shape, and Jolt." Said Hawk. "I have a job for you three."

Inside.

Thwack!

The USAgent's head snapped back with the blow. He tasted fresh blood in his mouth. Once again straining against the bonds that held him. The binders in the

Compound's holding cells were designed to hold someone with the strength of Wonder Man, so the Agent knew his efforts were futile.

"Weak, pathetic male!" yelled Man-Killer right in the Agent's face. "I'll break you, believe it. By the time I finish with you, you'll beg me to let you tell us everything we want to know." She sent a knee to the Agent's solar plexus. He made a whooshing sound as air was forced from his lungs.

The Agent had been steadily worked over for the better part of two hours, yet he eyed Man-Killer defiantly and spoke through gritted teeth. "I don't think so... I've... been hit by... better... than you..." his head slumped.

"Enough!" said the Crimson Cowl as she entered the room. "You've pounded on him for long enough. I know his type, he'll die before you beat anything out of him."

"Awww..." said Tiger-Shark "Ya went and ruined all our fun! We was havin' a real hoot of a time watchin' Man-Killer beat the tar out of flag-boy."

The Cowl eyed Tiger-Shark. "We are not here for your sadistic idea of amusement. We have an objective to obtain, and we will do so in a manner I see fit."

"C'mon Cowl," said Man-Killer "let me work him over some more. I'll get information out of him."

"No. I have a much better idea. Bring his teammate to me."

Flying Tiger had been watching over Tigra. At the Cowl's command, he brought her forward. The Cowl stood before USAgent and lifted his sagging head by the chin. "You seem to have little regard for your own health. I believe you would actually die before giving us access codes to your computer system. However, I am interested to see how long you will resist if the life of your teammate is threatened."

The Cowl strode to Tigra. A prehensile fold of her cape snaked out and swirled around Tigra's neck. "Tell me the access codes now, USAgent, or I will squeeze the life from this woman's lungs!"

Meanwhile, in New York City.

Simon Williams stood atop one of the many skyscrapers which littered the Manhattan skyline. He wanted nothing more than to be alone and in a city like this, the top of a building seemed to be the only way. Especially when you kept running into people you used to know.*

*Alex, in last issue. --Scott

Simon stared silently over the city, lost in his thoughts when his communicard beeped at him. He ignored it the first time, but it kept on beeping. Annoyed, he finally took it out and activated it. "Wonder Man here. This better be important."

"Simon!" Came Hawkeye's voice over the communicard. "Wherever you are right now, assemble your butt back to Palos Verdes, pronto!"

Wonder Man gazed blankly back at Hawkeye's face. "Why? What's the problem?"

"The problem is, that the Masters of Evil have captured the Compound. I really need your power to take it back!" "Look Hawkeye," Simon began. "I know I'm an Avenger, but I'm kind of on leave right now. You guys have handled stuff without me before."

"No, *you* look, Wonder Man!" Hawkeye's image on the tiny screen pointed a finger at Wonder Man. "Tigra and the Agent have been taken prisoner. Those two have put their lives on the line for you before. Now you'd better do the same for them. You told me you were part of this team* and never mentioned any leave. So, you get back here ASAP. *That is an order!*"

*AWC #103 --Scott

Wonder Man sighed. "Fine. I'll be there when I get there."

"Wha-? Simon, wai-" Simon clicked off the commuicard. He stood and launched himself into the sky.

"Well, so much for that." Said Hawkeye. "It looks like we can't count on Wondy showing up. If we're going to do this, it's going to be with who we have."

"I'm sure we'll all do as well as we can." Said the Swordsman. "We'll fight and free our friends." The others gathered nodded to affirm their assent.

"Good." Said Hawkeye "It's time to put our plan into motion. You all know what you need to do, lets get to it! Avengers Assemble!"

Inside.

The USAgent looked at the Cowl, who was choking Tigra with the folds of her cape. With his peripheral sight, he noted the locations of the other Masters. He was not as damaged as he had led them to think he was. Man-Killer's beating had been severe, but the Agent was a man of surpassing endurance and he had taken much worse before than what she had given.

Earlier, he had been able to sneak a quick message to Tigra: "Be ready when I make my move." He hoped she was still coherent enough to follow through.

"All right!" the Agent said. "I'll tell you what you want to know. Just don't kill her!"

The Cowl loosened her cape's grip around Tigra's neck. "Ah, see there? The USAgent can indeed be reasoned with."

"N-no... Agent..." said Tigra. "Can't I-let them..."

Agent looked directly at Tigra, meaningfully. "It's all right Greer. This is for the best...!" he hoped she got the message. Then he refocused his attention on the Cowl. "OK.

Here it is. Computer! Avengers priority access code: AV176-23 Agent!"

The computer acted on the recognized voice patterns of the USAgent and executed the command function. Suddenly, the restraints that held the Agent released. Immediately, he sprung from the apparatus and leapt on the nearest Master, Flying Tiger. He swung his fist in a downward two-fisted blow to the top of Flying Tiger's head. The villain fell to the floor like a ton of bricks.

Tigra, seeing the Agent's move, felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her. Pain and fatigue forgotten, she grabbed hold of the Cowl's cape around her neck and yanked it hard toward her. The Cowl was drug forward, close enough to land a powerful blow which sent the Cowl sprawling.

"Tigra, to the door-- NOW!"

The Masters, shaking themselves out of their surprise leapt to the attack. Man-Killer charged the USAgent, who ducked her wild swing. He countered with a shattering uppercut. Man-Killer stumbled back.

"There, you !@#\$%!! How do you like a taste of your own medicine!?" the Agent yelled.

Man-Killer Grinned savagely and shot back. "I found it... inadequate, weakling!" She pounced yet again.

Tigra made for the door, but Cyclone formed his winds about him and floated over in front of it, creating an impassable barrier. "Oh no, Mon Cherie! Today iz not a day for ezcaping! I have onlee to wait here for ze Cowl and Flying Tigair to join ze battle, and then you are defeated!"

The Agent was able to see Tigra's predicament, in between ducking punches with Man-Killer. "Photon shields, ignite!" He sent one flying at Cyclone.

"Arrgh!" said Cyclone, as the shield smacked into his head. He wobbled out of the way of the door. Tigra saw her

chance, but just then, her sense of smell caught something trying to sneak up behind her. She leapt straight up into the air as Tiger Shark made a leaping grab at her.

Tiger Shark landed on the floor on his stomach, and Tigra landed on her feet, like a cat, atop of him. "Ooof!" said Tiger Shark as Tigra bounded for the door.

She looked back to the Agent as she made it. He was slowly working his way to the door as well, fighting against Man-Killer for every inch.

Then, the Crimson Cowl's cape appendages swirled about the Agent. She was back in the fight. Man-Killer was thus finally able to land a solid blow against the Agent.

"Ge-get out of h-here!" screamed a staggered USAgent, seeing that Tigra was coming back to help him. "Save yourself and bring b-back the o-thers..."

Seeing the Agent go down, and that Cyclone and Tiger Shark were converging on her, Tigra decided fighting on wouldn't help Jack any. The best she could do was to get away.

"I'm sorry, Jack." she managed to blurt out as she ran towards freedom.

The Cowl looked down at the fallen Agent. "Your heroics are admirable, Avenger. But in the end they are futile. And they will cost you!" she looked to the other Masters. "Make him pay the price!" The Masters of Evil converged on the Agent.

Next Issue: The Agony of USAgent! The new guys fight! Where is Wondy!? And Hawkeye leads the attack! More thrills than you can shake a stick at from *Mighty MV1!!!*

Send all letters to beezer@webtv.net . Make sure to include "lines" in the subject line.

Plenty of great response for last issue! Lets see what you all had to say!

From: Rangelo@suffolk.lib.ny.us

Hey Scott! Glad to see another issue (Finally) Of WCA. I loved it! Keep up the good work here and over in Hawkeye. The whole attack of the Masters was great. I loved the tryouts etc. So who is the rescue team going to be? Jolt, Variable, and Shape? Those are my guesses.

Ralph

Glad you liked it, Ralph. For my part, I am *really* enjoying writing this storyline and I think it shows through in the finished product. As for the rescue team, you know who it's going to be now. Not bad guesses my friend!

From: tjburns@sigma.net

Hey Scott!

Great Work. Making Shape a reservist was very cool. I approve. Jolt will hopefully get a chance and the Variable is kinda cool. Come on Man, use the Osprey! He's kinda cool, in a loser sort of way. Anyway, whatever you do I'll be cool with it. Anyway you can steal Hercules? Or use War Machine since he's coming back soon? What about She-Hulk? Any of these would be cool. Keep up the great work!

TJB

Er, don't expect the Osprey to return anytime soon, TJ. Jolt will in fact get a chance as you have just seen. As for your other recommendations, I don't foresee any of them here in the near future, but you never know! Um, what was that about War-Machine???

From: tkc2@hotmail.com

Scooter,

Just finished AWC #104, and I gotta say that I loved it! You did a great job with all the candidates, especially Shape. You really nailed his speech and general attitude. I love it!

I also enjoyed the sub-plot with Simon. He's always been one of my favorites, and I'm glad to see you using him. I

look forward to how you're going to make Wonder Man a part of the team again (pleasepleaseplease!)...

Anyway, I'm sorry it's taken so long to read your stuff. Your work is the Whackos I've always enjoyed and missed for so long. Keep it up!

Kell

Kell, the Shape was a blast to write! I don't think I'd want to do it regularly though. :) As for Wonder Man, only time (and several issues) will tell what part he'll play. All I can say is, Stay Tuned! Coming soon, a story arc that Simon will have a MAJOR part to play in!

PLUG ALERT! If you haven't read Kell's Squadron Supreme on MV1, I highly recommend you do so. Kell has the Squadron down pat, and the stories are a thrill a minute!

AWC #106, by Scott Chamberlain

MV1

COMICS

#106

Jun-Yr.3

Hawkeye! USAgent! Tigra! WonderMan!



To combat those threats against which no hero could stand alone, Earth's Mightiest Heroes forged a covenant to unite in battle, to protect all mankind. Now, from a second base of operations, a new chapter in their legend is being written.

Van Plexico presents... *Avengers West Coast!*

Siege!!!

(Part 2)

Writer: Scott Chamberlain

Images: Chris Luna

Branch Editor: Lonni Holland

E.I.C.: Van Plexico

The sub-basements of the Avengers Compound.

"Yeaaaarrrrgh!"

The Crimson Cowl looked on as her team bludgeoned the USAgent. A hint of a smile crossed her lips beneath the mask she wore. *So, the Agent is finally made to scream...* She thought.

"Make him pay for for his crimes, Masters." She said.
"Helping a fellow prisoner to escape* is a serious offense."

*Last Issue --Scott

Jack Daniels sagged in his bonds. Blows continued to rain down on him as Tiger Shark, Man-Killer, Cyclone and Flying Tiger beat him. The bones in his left arm were shattered; a result of a particularly brutal assault on that part by Man-killer. Semi-coherently, Jack wondered if the arm would ever be useful again. His thoughts wandered then as his brain became numb to the pain and floated into a delusional state. Dreams and images assaulted the Avenger, as the physical torment continued.

Meanwhile, in the Computer Room, sub-basement.

WarToy stood like a statue. The fiber optic cables which connected her to the Avengers computer allowed her to communicate directly with it. Since none of the Masters had dropped in on her in over an hour, she had no need of verbal speech or physical movement.

The adamantium armored machine continued to run permutations into the computer, trying to break into all of its systems and data banks, though one system, she worked on with greater persistence, as ordered by the cowl. The computer had been far more resistant than expected, however, and WarToy had thus far been unsuccessful. Still, she continued feeding combinations into the machine:

5905GJG40JGE0FOR0E956UTG0ERG -ACCESS DENIED
YUG89F89G90DR0G8DG0094GD0FD0S -ACCESS DENIED
12GHIURW6890054948DJ3DJ0D9XZ0 -ACCESS DENIED

Then...

650507JRHEJSDW1MO0SD72QAZ0PO -ACCESS GRANTED.
Please select which personnel file you wish to view.]

WarToy allowed herself the physical manifestation of a smile. She began scrolling down the list, when another, previously broken-into system, the intruder alert, called her attention.

Security breach on south wall of Compound. Do you wish to engage defensive systems? |

Wartoy ignored the computers query for the moment. Instead she activated the intercom to the room where the prisoners were being held. She spoke vocally: "Cowl, the Avengers have begun their attack. They're coming at us from the south."

Momentarily, the Cowl's voice responded. "Very well. Activate defensive systems. Notify me if and when they manage to break through."

Wartoy complied. She activated the systems and watched amusedly as the systems fired upon the trespassers. Meanwhile, she began downloading the pertinent files into her memory storage.

And, in the Compound's cliffside quinjet hangar...

Hawkeye finished typing commands into the small access panel in the wall. "There," he said. "I've used a backdoor into the system to make Wartoy think the perimeter has been breached on the south wall. Hopefully, the ruse will distract her long enough to get us into the mansion."

Magdalene frowned in confusion. "I don't understand. How did we get this far into the compound without alerting the defensive systems?"

Hawk grinned. "We didn't, but because of this area's inaccessibility, the systems here aren't as thorough as elsewhere. When we scaled the cliffside and broke in through the hangar door, we set off a *delayed* warning to the main computer. I knew I had enough time to access and redirect where the warning came from. So the Masters will be looking for us from the south, but instead, we'll be hitting them from the access tube leading from here to the compound."

Lightning had a surprised look on his face. "But Hawk! What if some villain had broke in this way?"

"That's a chance I took when I reactivated the Compound, Miguel. In the back of my mind, I've always feared something like this could happen, so I left the hangar's security purposefully lax, in case something like this ever became necessary."

The Swordsman nodded. "A well laid plan. Let's hope that it works." He drew his sword.

Hawk readied his bow, and looked around at his 'team'. Himself, Swordsman and Magdalene, Lightning, Shape, the enigmatic Variable, and the suspicious, at least in Hawkeye's mind, Jolt. Tigra had been left behind due to her injuries- much to her anger. He sighed, wishing he had a more experienced group with him. He momentarily pondered trading away his bow if only Thor's hammer, or Iron Man's repulsors could be beside him. "Well, let's get to it. Avengers, and um the rest of you, Assemble!"

Avengers Citadel, Washington D.C.

The world about was awash in flames. The nation's Capitol burned with a ferocity the likes of which had never been seen upon the Earth. Heracles watched all of this with macabre fascination. From his perch high atop the citadel, he bore witness to the Earth's demise.

"By my beard... What destruction hath we wrought?"

Avengers citadel as yet remained unharmed by the maelstrom, its defensive shields still held out, though they weakened by the minute.

Heracles looked upon the fallen green-clad form of his teammate. "Good Guardian, I suppose this be a fitting resting place for thee. Surely for I as well. My end draweth nigh."

The Prince of Power continued to regard him. The green-clad man lay on a table. His shield, bearing the insignia of the United Nations, lay on his chest. Heracles reflected. Once Captain America, he changed his name to the Terran

Guardian after the Nations of the world united to singularly resist the Skrull invasion. Not that any of that mattered now. The Avengers saved the world from the Skrulls, only to bring it down themselves. "Damn..." Heracles spat on the floor, disgusted at his inability to see it coming, disgusted at his impotency at being unable to stop it. "Damn..."

The power failed at last in the citadel and the shield grid failed. Quickly, the inferno began to creep up on the edifice. Heracles wondered if even his godly body would be able to stand up to the white-hot flames. He doubted it.

Behind him, a bright light suddenly formed. Spinning, Heracles squinted, trying to see into it, to no avail.

"Son of Zeus," said a voice from within the light. "Join with us now, if you would prevent this from happening in other worlds."

"Who...?" said the demi-god. "Who are you?"

"Of what import is my name, while you stand on the threshold of Hades? Do you not perceive your own soul to be damned for the crimes you and your fellow Avengers have committed here? Join with us, and find redemption by preventing this tragedy from occurring elsewhere in the multi-verse."

The voice's words made sense to Heracles. Indeed he did feel damned. Perhaps if he were able to stop this elsewhere, the souls of the dead would stop crying out to him from the grave..."Very well, the Prince of Power shall join thee!" He stepped into the light, disappearing from sight.

And then, a world died...

Aboard the Avenger quinjet outside the compound's perimeter.

Tigra sat in the pilot's chair of the quinjet. Her injured state* caused enough concern to Hawkeye that he had left

her behind to attempt to get ahold of the East Coasters, if they returned in time to help.

*Tigra was baten at the hands of the Masters of Evil last issue.--Scott

Greer fumed. She knew she was well enough to go with the others. She'd been much worse off and still fought on before in her career. In her mind, Hawkeye was just trying to protect her... keep her out of harm's way. Just like the old days, she thought.

"I can't do this." Tigra said to herself. "Every time I join up with the Avengers, I wind up on the outside looking in, while the others take care of the bad guys." She slammed a fist own on the console. "No more! If I have to strike out on my own to prove my worth, that's exactly what I'll do. This pussycat's days of being a second-rate Avenger are over. One way or another."

The access tunnel between the compound and the hangar.

Hallie Takamura's heart was in her throat. A bead of sweat trickled down her forehead. She hadn't felt this nervous since her first time out with the Thunderbolts.

Suck it up, Hallie! She thought to herself. *You've done this before. You know what it takes. You know what you are capable of. So settle down and do it!*

The sweat however, kept trickling; the heart, still beating within her esophagus. Hallie was forced to admit to herself that it had never quite been like this before. These Avengers were *real* heroes, not a bunch of half-baked supervillains masquerading as such. She knew that as a former member of that group, that everyone would be keeping an eye on her, waiting to see if she would stab them in the back.

Ahead, Hawkeye gave a quiet signal to stop. Silently, the group waited. Jolt looked around and saw that the Living Lightning was watching her. His face wore an expression of calm understanding. He smiled.

Hallie blushed and looked away. She kicked herself mentally for being so easy to read. The Lightning whispered to her. "Hey, don't get yourself tied up into knots. I've been where you are and trust me, everything will work out."

Ahead, Hawkeye signaled to move ahead again. Jolt looked back to the Lightning and gave him a quick smile before she started off again. She hoped he was right.

The compound's sub-basement.

The Crimson Cowl stood over the battered and bloodied body of the USAgent and nodded with satisfaction. "Very good, troops. This is one Avenger we won't have to contend with again today." She spoke to the intercom system. "WarToy. What is the status of the intruders?"

WarToy's synthetic voice came back immediately. "The defense systems continue to hold them at bay. They'll never get through before I complete my downloads."

"Excellent. Route the surveillance systems to give me a visual of them from the monitor in this room."

"Monitor enabled." said WarToy's voice. "Enjoy the show."

The other Masters gathered around the Cowl to watch. A view of the south lawn showed the defensive systems firing various weapons at attackers that... weren't there. The Cowl arched an eyebrow at this sight. "What's this? There is no one attacking? WarToy! Did you visually confirm the presence of the intruders?"

"I saw no need."

"You saw no need!? Damn your robotic hide! It was a diversion!" The Cowl looked at the rest of her team. "Masters, prepare for an attack!"

Just then, the door of the room blew in, and Hawkeye's team poured through the entrance. "An attack, Cowlie?" said Hawk. "Is that what you were gonna say?" He fired a blast arrow at her. "Cause if so, it was a pretty good guess."

The Cowl knocked aside the arrow with a cape fold. "Masters attack!"

"Avengers Assemble!" Hawkeye shouted. The battle was joined.

The Living Lightning crackled into his energy form, taking aim at who he perceived to be the biggest threat, which was Man Killer, with her super strength. Electricity arced across the room, striking the brutish woman.

"ARRRRRRRR!" She cried. "You'll pay for that, little man!"

Tiger Shark lept at Magdalene and got a face full of power staff for his efforts. "Yaaah!"

The Swordsman looked to his love. "Are you alright, Maggie?"

"Fine, love." she saw Flying Tiger, about to pounce. "Look to your own guard!"

the Swordsman took a slash across his chest, courtesy of Flying Tiger. "Hah!" said the villain. "First blood is mine!"

The Swordsman narrowed his eyes. "Yes, but the last shall be mine!" He aimed a flurry of cuts and strokes at Flying Tiger.

Cyclone formed his winds about him and charged the Variable. "Ah, monsieur... Eet appears that I must defeat you. I deu so hope you like enjoy my winds..."

The Variable, took a couple of steps back, trying to keep out of Cyclone's winds. Then his body and costume shimmered briefly. He blinked in confusion, then a grin spread across his face. "Actually, I prefer broiling heat to wind." He stretched out his hands toward Cyclone. Great gouts of fire spewed forth and swirled around the villain.

"Arrrrrrgh!" cried Cyclone, retreating and changing the pattern of his winds to keep a shield between him and the Variable.

Jolt lept around the room like a human dynamo, her bioenergy fueling several well-timed strikes at the enemies. As she flipped out of the way of a Tiger Shark downstroke, a prehensile cape appendage swirled around her neck, cutting off her air.

"Ah!" said the Cowl. "I know you; one of those turncoat Thunderbolts. You would have been well served to join MY Masters instead. Now, you'll pay for your mistake." The fold of the cape wound tighter around Jolt's neck.

A high pitched whining sounded then, and an arrow came flying from Hawkeye's bow. The buzzsaw head sliced neatly through the Cowl's appendage, freeing Jolt. "Yeaaaaaahhhhh!" shrieked the Cowl holding her head in her hands. "My cape! MY CAPE!!" She fell to the ground, stunned.

"Th-thanks..." said Jolt. "I thought I was gone threre." "Don't sweat it, kid." Said Hawkeye, firing a concussion arrow at Man-Killer. "Just get back into the fight. We need your powers."

Hawk's arrow glanced off Man-Killer, to little effect. The amazon-like woman kept swinging at the Lightning, unable to hit his fast-as-light form. On the other hand, no matter how many times he struck her with his bolts, the woman steadfastly refused to go down.

Miguel had an idea. "Magdalene! I think we can do better against each others opponents. Switch off!"

Magdalene shrugged, dropping Tiger Shark for Man-Killer. She swung her powerstaff, which was arm blocked by her opponent.

The Lightning allowed a busrt of electricity to arc from his body toward Tiger Shark, who laughed. "You better do more than that, boy. I can take this all day!"

In response, Lightning turned up the volage. "I was trying not to hurt you, *vato* . But you dont know when to go down!"

The water held within Tiger Shark's suit began to boil away from the heat generated by the electricity. Further, the water was an excellent conductor for the energy, and the villain fell to his knees. "No! I cant.... be beatennnnn..." he fell.

Flying Tiger gave ground to the Swordsman. The close quarters of the room gave him no room to use his aerial combat techniques. The Swordsman was a far better melee fighter, and Flying Tiger had the cuts and bruises to prove it. "Surrender now, villain, and I will spare you further harm!" the Swordsman commanded.

The Cowl finally rose from he shock of the severed fold. She quickly assesed that her team was on the ropes. But she had to give Wartoy time to finish the downloads. A caped appendage lashed out at Hawkeye, woh was laying down a supression fire against the other Masters.

Hawkeye's super-sensitive hearing aids warned him that it was coming. He managed to dodge out of the way, twisting in mid air to fire a shot in return. The Cowl lashed out with a fold to deflect the shot, but the glue arrow burst upon contact, fusing that appendage to the rest of her cape, rendering it useless.

Then Shape, who had ben keeping an uncharacteristic low profile in the fight so far, slunk up behind the Cowl, and started winding his plastic body around her. "Shape *got* red lady!"

"Arrrr!" yelled the Cowl. "Get off me, you cretin!"

Meanwhile, Cyclone, kept the Variable's fire blasts at bay with his wind-shield. "Ah, you canno' hope to defeat me with those blasts! Why, I cain deflaict thaim all day!"

The Variable shrugged. "Yeah, you're probably right." His body shimmered again, aquiring some new random power. "Lets see what this does, however." In the blink of an eye, Variable had run around Cyke's shield and landed a right

cross on chin, sending him backwards. Variable chuckled. "I love it when Lightning speed comes up."

The battle seemed well in the Avengers hands. Then the tables turned... Magdalene landed a solid blow on Man-Killer with her powerstaff. Suddenly, she was grabbed from behind, hoisted high into the air and slammed forcefully to the floor, where she laid still. Wartoy stood over her, leering evilly. "Can anyone join this party?"

"Maggie!" shouted the Swordsman. He fired an energy burst at Wartoy from his sword. The energy dissipated harmlessly on her adamantium hide. Wartoy returned the favor by firing beams from her eyes, nailing the Swordsman squarely. Flying Tiger took advantage and scored hits with his claws. Phillip reeled.

Hawkeye took stock of the situation. "Lightning! Hit her from the left. I'll fire from the right!" Miguel moved to comply, shooting electricity at the metal monster.

Wartoy regarded the attack. "While my adamantium hide is conductive to electricity, my inner components are well insulated from such pathetic attacks!"

"Let's see how insulated you are from this!" Hawkeye fired an arrow, which released an EMP burst upon nearing Wartoy. The living machine staggered, as her computer driven mind lost control. But then, her failsafes came online, and she grinned at the archer. "Try again, sport. I can take more than anything you've got!"

The Cowl was trying to free her cape of the glue, and herself from Shape's entanglement when Wartoy entered. Upon seeing her, she grew livid with anger. "Why are you here! We're buying time for you to complete your mission!"

Wartoy gave her the electronic equivalent of rolling eyes. "I'm all done with that. Now I'm here to help kick some Avenger butt!"

"We'll see who does the butt-kicking around here." Jolt quipped, hopping and leaping around Wartoy, landing ineffectual bioenergy punches.

"No!" cried Hawkeye "Get away from her! You can't do anything, Jolt!"

Wartoy regarded Jolt contemptuously. "Is that the best you can do? Let me show you how the big girls play!" With reflexes belying her gigantic metal girth, Wartoy struck Jolt backhanded, knocking her out of the air. Hallie cried out as she slammed against a wall and slid to the floor.

Hawkeye knew he was in trouble. Only he, the Variable and Miguel were left to fight. He needed to think of a way to stop Wartoy fast, or it would be over. "Lightning, keep harrying Wartoy. Distract her! Variable, can you come up with something to stop an Adamantium-skinned monster?"

""Er, I can try... but I don't have any control over what power I get..."

"Just do it." Hawkeye fired a pair of arrows at Cyclone and Flying Tiger, keeping them at bay.

"Here goes nothing!" The Variable shimmered, stood still a moment, getting a handle on his new power. Then, he fired liquidy missiles from his hands. The missiles hit Wartoy and hissed, but seemed to cause no real damage. "Well, so much for acid..."

Wartoy fired her eye beams at Variable, knocking him back. "Much more effective than yours, I'd say!"

Suddenly, Wartoy was knocked from her feet and sent flying. Such force that could stagger the behemoth made everyone in the room go slack-jawed, Avenger and Master alike. All eyes turned to see who could have done such a thing. Then, Hawkeye cried out joyously: "**Wonder Man!**"

Simon Williams stood just inside the doorway, his ironically red eyes burned brightly, like newly molten lava. "Yeah, I'm

here. I guess you really needed me after all."

"It's about time!" Hawk yelled. Then he pointed at Wartoy. "Get her!"

Wartoy stood up, and grinned at Wonder Man. "Not bad Movie-boy, but then again, not nearly good enough. Lets see what else you've got!" She fired her eye beams at Wondy.

Simon staggered under the force of the beams, but then shrugged it off. "I dont think so, Alkhema." He fired his belt jets and streaked across the room, fists forward. Wartoy stood to take the blow.

Wondy's fist clanged against Waroty's shell like the clapper of some ancint churchbell. The gong sound made everyone in the room hold their ears painfully. Wartoy sailed off her feet, busting through the wall which connected to the computer room. Immediately, she was on her feet again.

"I can take anything you can dish out, Wonder-Bread. My skin is ipervious to anyhting. I am indestructible!" She laughed and struck back at Simon, snapping his head around from the force of the hit.

Wondy whipped his head back, his eyes were blindingly bright. "Honey, you're beaten, you just dont know it yet." The glow of his eyes slowly started spreading across his whole body. He grimaced in rage, a beacon of red ionic energy. The energy washed over everyone in the room, sending them all reeling. All except Wondy and Wartoy.

"Yaaaaaah!" cried Shape. "Bright light hurt Shape eyes!"

Wartoy struck Wonder Man again, but he shrugged the blow off and advanced. "C'mon baby. Come get some!" He snapped her head back with an uppercut, actualy stunning the machine. Then, taking advantage, Simon grabbed her by the neck with one hand and her wrist with the other hand. He began pulling and squeezing.

"Fool!" laughed Wartoy. "This is nothing! I am adamantium, do you hear? ADAMANTIUM!"

Wondy nodded. "I hear you." He redoubled his efforts. Suddenly, a look of panic swept over Wartoy's face, servomotors in her arm began to snap as Wondy pulled. Connections in her neck were being crushed as Wondy squeezed.

"NO!" she cried. "Impossible! You cant do this to me!"

Wonder Man smirked. "Yeah.... Right..." He squeezed her neck one last time and her head popped into the air like a champagne cork. He ripped her arm away from it's connections at the elbow an tossed it away casually. Then he regarded Wartoy's staggering body. "I'm Wonder Man. I can do anything."

What was left of Wartoy stumbled around a bit, then finally crashed to the floor.

Hawkeye watched in amazement, as did all the others still conscious in the room. Then he noted that Simon's energy was burning, and weakening everyone. "Wonder Man! Got to... Turn your- your power... down...!" He managed to get it all out as he slowly sank to the floor.

Simon looked around at what he was doing. "Good Lord!" His energy aura shrank immediately back into himself and he moved swiftly to Hawkeye's side. "You alright, Hawkeye?"

Hawk nodded. "I will be, in a moment. Quick, secure the Masters. We can't let them escape."

"Oh... I think it's too late for that." The Crimson Cowl had climbed to her feet again. "You've destroyed my pet robot, but with any luck, We'll still be able to use what she has inside." The Cowl regarded Hawkeye with a smirk, behind her mask. "You've won the battle today, archer. But the war has already been lost- you'll be made to see that soon

enough." She began to glow brightly as her teleportation took effect.

"Wonder Man! Stop her!"

Simon thudered forth with his belt jets, but he was too late, the Cowl and the rest of the Masters of Evil, disappeared from sight.

"Blast!" Hawk growled. "We've got to find a way to negate that teleport power."

Jolt sat up, rubbing her head "Ow..." She peered around. "What hit me?"

"That would have been Wartoy." said the Swordsman, rising groggily to his feet. He helped Magdalene up as well.

"By the Fourth Ring!" she said. "I've never been hit so hard."

Shape rubbed his rubbery head with his hand. "Shape not feel good!"

Hawkeye was by the side of the USAgent. Battered and bloodied, the Agent barely breathed. "We've got to get Jack to the infirmary. Miguel, call Dr. Sanford. Get him here pronto!" Clint looked around the room, noting that no one had really come out of this unscathed. "Tell him we've got a lot of injuries."

Two days later.

Clint sat in the infirmary, where he had been for the last few days. The Agent was still out of it and Clint resolved to wait till his old friend came around, even though Dr. Sanford assured him the Agent merely needed rest.

The Agent opened an eye and looked at the haggard, unshaven Hawkeye. "Jesus," he croaked. "First thing I see when I wake up is you? I guess I must have went to hell."

The two looked at each other a moment, then broke into laughter.

NEXT ISSUE: Things quiet down a bit as we gear up for or next big storyline. That doesn't mean monumental things won't be happening! Return in thirty for: "Big Decisions"

Send all letters to: scooter@paratime.ca . Make sure to include "lines" in the subject line.

Lot of responses to last issue. Let's get to em:

From: tjburns@sigma.net (TJ Burns)

Hey Scott! Sorry to be the one to tell you, but Shape was a villain of the Squadron Supreme's before he was a hero. So we had an all former villain team, but Variable - As far as I know anyway. As for the actual Masters of Evil scene, here's hoping Agent gets the chance to bludgeon Man-Killer to death slowly. Keep up the good work!

TJB

Okay, several people actually pointed out my faux-pas about the Shape to me. I goofed. :) But, you don't get a faux-prize unless you explain *WHY* the Avengers didn't know about his criminal past. Better luck next time, TJ.

From: lonni@idirect.com (The Avenger Lady)

Bet you thought I forgot you . I really am enjoying this title more each issue. From Clint's rally cry in 103 to the the Agony of the Agent.... it just gets better & better.

I'm intrigued by the Huntress as this is part of Mock's past I know little about and I'm curious to see how the 2 realities are gonna tie together. You continue to keep me guessing here & in the Hawk series and I love the fun of speculating where you are heading.

Wooo hooo - Shape back! Shape an Avengers - Hawkeye say Shape is! And how prophetic that Hawk has Jolt on his team - as he may soon in the MU! As always a great portrayal of Agent - a character all too often ignored because he started out as a bit of a jerk - hey so did Clint!

You've written another great issue and I eagerly await the next one (do you realize it is almost 10 months since I first wrote you a fan letter?)

Lonni

10 months? Time flies when you're having fun, eh Lonni? :) More regarding the Huntress's story was revealed this issue. Some of you readers may already be guessing where I'm heading with that. (If you do, don't spoil it for the other readers. It'll be our little secret.) As for the Agent. I'm really trying to show the readership here at MV1 that he's a good character who has been much maligned by his peers (and his writers) For much too long. I hope everyone else will come around to liking him like you and I do. Because as a wise man once said, "He aint going anywhere anytime soon."

WEST COAST AVENGERS # 107

WEST COAST AVENGERS

107



MV1

July, Year 3

"Can I Get a Roster In Here?"

Introducing new writer Mark Bousquet

DEDICATED TO STEVE ENGLEHART

Clint Barton, the Avenger known as Hawkeye, finished punching the commands into the central controlboard. He wanted to make certain that anything that came through this system: any emergency calls, something from the Avengers back east, a security problem inside their Compound ... anything was routed right to the monitors in the central living room. He needed everybody present - not for long, he hoped, but he wasn't taking chances.

He strolled out of the security room and headed for the assembled Avengers and guests who were supposed to be waiting for him. He'd hoped to have done this sooner, for his

own peace of mind, if nothing else, but someone had busted into his New York apartment, leaving him a cryptic message and so he had to head to New York to check it out. Of course, it didn't turn out to be a damsel in distress, but Shroud needing help with some of his former teammates in Night Shift. *

*** See HAWKEYE # 10 for the full story - That was Lonni's first issue, Mark**

But back to the business at hand.

Clint had some decisions to make about who was going to stay and who was going to go. Sitting in the room waiting for him were: current West Coasters Tigra, Wonder Man, US Agent, the former T-Bolt and recent Avenger try-out Jolt, Avengers reservists Living Lightning, Swordsman II and Magdalene, the former Squadron Supreme member Shape and Avenger try-out and mystery man Variable.

How was he ever going to pare these nine folks down to a manageable number?

This was the part of leading a team that he hated: telling people they had to leave. He'd had it done to him in the past and it burned. It still burned, even to this day, that a government jerksuit could come into the Avengers family and say, "Hawkeye out. Falcon in."

Freakin' Gyrich.*

*** See the 180's issues of Avengers - Gyrich rocks**

"Hey leader-man, what's the word?" US Agent asked as Clint entered the room to face the nine heroes gathered before him.

"The word is we're lucky we had as much help as we did during our fight with Crimson Cowl's Masters of Evil," Hawkeye snapped. "We were taken like amateurs. Just look around at the Compound. We've got major repairs to do here, folks." *

*** See the recent classic Avengers West Coast 104 - 106 - Misses Beezer Already Mark**

"Get ready for the time-honored "we need teamwork" speech," Tigra smiled broadly as she stretched her limbs on the couch, but no one laughed.

"That's enough, Tigra," Hawkeye ordered as he looked around at the gathered heroes, trying to read them as best he could. "First things first. I need to know if the three people who've agreed to be on this Avengers branch - Tigra, Agent and Wonder Man - are still with us."

"I'm here until you kick me out," Agent smiled. "Then after you do that, I'll be right back to knock some sense into you, Bird-Man."

"I'm definitely still in," Tigra purred. "No way I'm giving up one of those bungalows."

Hawkeye shook his head and cursed Tigra under his breath. The last thing he wanted was folks sticking around just because the accommodations were comfortable. At the Mansion, space was limited, but here there was plenty of room. "Simon? How about you?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever," he sighed from his seat by the window, not bothering to turn around. He was physically in the room, visually looking out to the sea, but emotionally his thoughts were solely on Wanda, the Scarlet Witch, the woman he loved who didn't love him. *

*** See the Scarlet Witch limited series by Neil Gow, located at the Dark Lore Branch**

"Okay then," Hawk frowned. Now came the hard part.

"Swordsman and Magdalene, as the most experienced Avengers left - not to mention the fact," he said under his breath as he eyed Tigra, Agent and Wondy, "that you're relatively stable - I'm offering you permanent slots on the roster."

Swordsman and Magdalene looked at each other and smiled, then turned to Hawkeye. It was Magdalene that spoke, "No thank you, Hawkeye. We've done some thinking and decided that we need to do more thinking."

"If you ever need us," Swordsman said, standing and walking to Hawk, "just call. But right now we need some time alone."

"I understand," Hawkeye said, disappointed. These two weren't big names that were going to add some public luster to the roster, but they were both solid, dependable Avengers allies that he wanted to get to know better. "Another time, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Swordsman answered as he shook Clint's hand. Magdalene nodded her head in Hawk's direction as she headed outside. "We've still got some packing to do, but ... mind if we borrow a Quinjet back east?" Swordsman asked.

"Go ahead," Hawk answered, smiling. "Just be home by ten, kids."

Swordsman smiled and then he, too, was gone.

"Alright," Hawkeye sighed, "who's next?"

Downtown Los Angeles

"The rapture is coming!" shouted a man in a silver-grey costume as he slid from teller's window to teller's window inside a bank, taking whatever cash they had.

"Whoah, check this guy," one of the customers, a college kid, said to another.

"He's sliding all over the place," his friend answered, watching half-interested. "Is this all he does?"

"You need to be ready for the rapture! Prepare yourselves to feel the embrace of tomorrow!"

The villain known as Slyde finished taking the money that was readily available to him and left. There was no need for a huge score that might result in his getting caught. His

brothers needed money, but they needed brothers even more.

More brothers would be nice, too.

AVENGERS COMPOUND

"Living Lightning," Hawkeye began, "how 'bout it? Ready to sign up for the long haul?"

"I'd love, too," Miguel Santos replied, causing Clint to smile. He was looking forward to working with some of the younger Avengers the way Cap used to work with him. "Being an Avenger is very important to me, but first I have to finish college."

Hawkeye wanted to slap his hands to his head. "Of course, Miguel, but with your powers ..."

"I'm just moments away, even though I'm miles up the coast, right?" Miguel smiled. "If you really want me, Hawkeye, I can stay on as a reserve. I know I'm not that far away, but this Avenging business strikes me as a distraction from my studies. I couldn't commit full-time and you need that from a younger member of the team. If I was older and had studied the case files enough so that I felt comfortable with folks we might run across, then I'd do it, but I fear that I'd be a hindrance to the Avengers."

"Well, geez, that's pretty well thought out," Hawkeye smiled. "I guess I can't dissuade, you. Consider yourself a reservist, then. Until you graduate. Then we get you full time." Clint smiled at the younger hero, who returned the gesture.

"That just leaves Jolt, Shape and Variable, then," Clint said as he turned to look at the three remaining try-outs. 'Why do I feel the urge to start humming Eeenie-Meenie-Miny-Moe?' he thought, rubbing his face.

Venice Beach

Samuel Guthrie, the mutant who was both a former member of the New Mutants, X-Force and X-Men, sat on the beach in shorts and a t-shirt, scratching his head.

He'd seen a lot in the days since he'd left his Kentucky Homestead, been to other planets even, but he doubted he had ever seen a sight more alien to him than Venice Beach.

There were weight-lifters here who made Bishop look like the Scarecrow. And the women ... not that he really minded looking, of course. Just that he felt a little guilty about it.

That's all, just a ... little ... guilt ... y ... he thought as his entire head moved of his own accord following a threesome of women stroll past him down the beach.

Sam sighed to himself, staring out at the water. It'd been a tough, well, bizarre couple of days, he figured. He'd see a lot of pain and even some death out at the Vault, but at least things turned out okay. For the most part, at least. *

*** Curious? See the VAULT # 9 - 12 for the entire CORRUPTION storyline, coming soon! - Big Vault Fan Mark**

He left the Vault, curious as to where fate would bring him next. He could go back to the X-Men, he supposed, but ... he had to be honest, he never felt at home there. He felt at home with the New Mutants and X-Force, but he was "the rookie" with a team of veterans on the X-Men. He missed Bobby and Tabitha and James and Terry ... and being with the X-Men just seemed like a reminder of who wasn't there as opposed to those who were there.

"Heya, cutie, come here often?"

Broken out of his thoughts, Sam looked up into a pair of intoxicating green eyes. "Uh, first time, actually," he answered, trying hard to keep his gaze on her eyes and not let them drop ... lower. 'Ah miss Tab,' his subconscious brought to the front of his mind. *

*** Tab is Sam's ex-girlfriend, a member of X-Force known as Meltdown.**

"I figured as much," the cutie smiled, "your whiter than snow covered mountains." She arched her back, thrusting her chest forward in a relaxed, practiced manner. "Why don't you take off that t-shirt and soak in the sun," she smiled down at him. "You're not as big as those muscle-bound mutations over there lifting weights, but you definitely - definitely - work out. Whatcha doin' in Sunshine Land, cornbread?"

"Ah'm on vaca-"

"Hey! Watch it!"

Sam was on his feet and looking for the person screaming for help before the woman had stopped screaming. Venice Beach had just gotten weirder.

"Uh, miss," he asked, not turning around, "who's that guy in a silver suit sliding down the walkway? We don't have super villains in Kentucky."

AVENGERS COMPOUND

"Right, then," Hawkeye started, hating that hopeful eyes were on him, but trying to smile through it, "what are we going to do with the three of you?" With himself, Agent, Simon and Tigra already committed, that was only four people on the roster. He had the room to add the three people in front of him, but he didn't know them, and thus, he didn't trust them. It wasn't a knock on them, but a practical response. If he was the leader of a group of people that meant he was responsible for them, and that meant he had to be certain of the people on the team.

"Shape an Avenger!" Shape announced proudly. "Hawkman said so."

"Uh, yeah I did, kinda," Hawkeye mumbled, thinking back over the last couple of days. "And it's Hawk-EYE, not Hawk-

MAN, just for the record ..."

"Shape reservist," Shape smiled, "just like Lightning Man." He smiled at Miguel who smiled back politely.

"Well," Hawkeye said gently, "you were going to go back to Project: Pegasus, right?"

"Shape no want to go back. Shape like sun!"

Hawkeye shook his head, "Sure. Why not? You can stay in a bungalow, if you'd like."

"Shape like Hawkman! Thank you Hawkman!"

"HawKEYE, Shape, HawKEYE," Clint mumbled.

"You can count me out," Variable announced. "I'm not ready for this."

"What?" Hawkeye said, somewhat surprised. "I thought you wanted to stay, and you showed some real initiative against the Masters of Evil, I thought." Clint wanted Variable to stay, if any of these three were going to. He figured he could play the mentor role to the guy and help him deal with his powers.

"Maybe I did, but that was ... too much," he shook his head. "Look, I'm not saying I'm going to give up being a hero, but ... I need some time to get better. That's all."

With that, Variable stood up and walked out the door. *

*** But not out of MV1. Stay tuned to the HAWKEYE solo series for future appearances of Variable! à Now written by Hawkeye's # 1 fan Lonni Holland**

"See you around. Don't call us, we'll call you," Agent scoffed.

"That's enough, Agent," Hawkeye ordered.

"So that leaves me," Jolt said solidly. This was the person Clint didn't want to deal with. She was a former Thunderbolt, for crying out loud. Sure, she helped the Avengers at the end, but still ... she was a kid. Not just a

rookie, but a kid. How could he make a kid an Avenger? It was too dangerous for someone that inexperienced.

Hawkeye looked at her closely, admiring the kid's strong will, but not missing the fact that beneath the tough exterior, she was hurting. "I won't make you an Avenger, Jolt," he said flatly.

"Fine," she stomped her foot. "I don't need you, anyways. I don't even know why I tried out for your stupid -"

"But I will give you a chance to earn it for yourself."

"Huh?"

"I'll let you stay here, at the Compound, if you'd like. You can train with us and use our facilities, but you're enrolling in school first."

"But I-"

"Hey, I don't want to look out for a kid," Agent chimed in, and the rest of the people in the room all leaned in a closer. All except Wonder Man, who continued to stare out at the water.

"No buts," Hawkeye said, ignoring Agent. "That's the deal. You're enroll in school and you can stay. I'm not going to let you go out on missions with us for a good long time, but if you stay here and work at it, someday, maybe Avengers membership will be for you."

Jolt wanted to scream. There was no reason she couldn't fight alongside these guys. She'd been in plenty of fights with the Thunderbolts and ...

"Sure, Hawkeye, sounds great," she replied, hoping she didn't sound too dejected.

"Great," Hawkeye beamed. This didn't work out too bad, he told himself. Sure, a team of Hawkeye, US Agent, Tigra, Wonder Man with Living Lightning as a reserve and Jolt in-training - plus Shape, couldn't forget Shape - wasn't going to set the world on fire, but it was a team he felt good

about. He wished he had more experience and a bigger name, but this was-

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

The large screen television in the room turned itself on, automatically selecting the Super Channel, and the team saw a news report. The Compound's computers were programmed to make the team aware when a live broadcast featuring a possible emergency was taking place.

"—bizarre scene at Venice Beach featuring the minor super villain Slyde and an unknown man in a t-shirt ..."

The Avengers were on their feet, watching the broadcast. Except for Wonder Man, who merely turned around.

"Anyone know Slyde?" Hawkeye asked.

Agent replied, dead serious, "He's a minor Spider-Man foe from back east. He slides around, that's his thing. Real hard to grab hold of. You'd know that, too, if you spent more time looking over all the files we have, Leader Bird."

"The hero is Cannonball," Hawkeye informed, ignoring Agent's comment. He knew that Agent had access to government files the rest of them didn't and didn't want to get into it right here. "One of the X-Men, though apparently he's not on the team ... right ... now." If the other members of the Whackos had been standing closer to the tv than Hawkeye, they could've seen the big smile that played across his face. "Fire up a Quinjet, folks, we've got superheroing to do."

"What?" Agent asked, making vocal the confused looks of all in the room. "This guy can handle a chump like Slyde."

But Hawkeye was already out the door.

Ten Minutes Later at Venice Beach ...

Cannonball blasted through the air, tailing Slyde. He had tried to grab him a couple times, but his costume was superslick and he couldn't hold him for long. He needed to

find some way to get Slyde to stop. Maybe if he could grab a rope, he could tie up his feet or ...

From nowhere, an arrow shot into Slyde's path, five feet in front of him. The arrow hit the ground and a large net popped up. Slyde had no chance to move and the small-time villain was caught up in the net.

"No!" Slyde hollered.

Sam dropped out of the sky, landing next to Slyde. He was grateful for the help, but he didn't know who had given it. For all he knew it could be another super villain looking for revenge. Putting himself between Slyde and the direction the arrow came in, Sam turned around. "Whoah. Avengers."

"That we are," Hawkeye beamed. "Folks behind me are Tigra, US Agent and Wonder Man. Welcome to California, Cannonball."

"Recognized me even without my costume, huh?" Sam asked, shaking Hawkeye's hand. "Thanks for the help."

"Not a problem, I'm sure you woulda had him soon anyways."

"Yeah, but Hawkeye likes stealing the spotlight," Agent joked.

"So what's an X-Man doing in California?" Hawkeye asked.

"Just sight-seeing, really. And ah'm not really with the X-Men these days," Cannonball admitted.

"That so?" Hawkeye smiled. "How'd you like to be an Avenger?"

"What?" Sam asked, stunned. He checked out the faces of the Avengers to see if they were kidding. They looked serious. This was ... unexpected ...

"We took a vote in the Quinjet on the way over," Hawkeye told him. "If you'd like to join the team, we'd love to have you."

"But ... you don't really even know me," Sam stammered.

"We know enough," Hawkeye answered seriously. "And, honestly, we're a little short on man-power right now. All we have after the four of us are rookies. We could use a little experience to help out."

Sam's head was spinning. Growing up in Kentucky, he didn't know most of the superheroes he had run into. News on folks like Spider-Man and Daredevil never really filtered down that far - enough to know the name, but not the hero in a lot of cases. But the Avengers ... everyone knew the Avengers. And to hear Hawkeye say that they wanted him because he was experienced ... it made him feel good. And wanted. On some level, that made him feel especially good.

"Ah - Ah don't know," he answered honestly. "This is a bit unexpected. Ah just came here to-"

"Come on back to the Compound then and think about it," Hawkeye answered seriously. "We don't want to force you into anything, and to be fair, you can't make a decision without seeing the set-up. But I can say this honestly, we'd like you to join the group. All of us. Just don't ask Simon right now, he's a bit grumpy." Hawkeye smiled.

Sam looked to Wonder Man who just sighed and shrugged.

"Yeah, enough with the sales pitch, Feather Head," Agent joked, poking Hawkeye in the ribs. "Show him the view and we won't be able to turn him away. Look, kid, you're the goods," Agent said to Sam. "We've been around long enough to know when a person's got what it takes. You do. We all want you on the team for that reason and that reason only."

"Well, he's got a nice butt, too," Tigra smiled, leaning on Agent's shoulder.

"Yes, yes, we can't forget the butt now, can we?" Hawkeye sighed, looking at Tigra. "Will you come back to the Compound with us and look things over?"

"Sure," Sam nodded, still a little stunned but warming to the idea. "But what do we do with this guy?" he asked, pointing to Slyde.

"Cops are coming now, they can handle him," Hawkeye answered. "Be good, Slyde."

"The end is coming," Slyde said calmly. "Be prepared for tomorrow. Only those truly enlightened will survive. Take this and join us. It will be the first day of the rest of your life." He slipped a card out of his pocket and tossed it to the ground.

Hawkeye picked it up and looked at what it said:

THE ENLIGHTENMENT FOUNDATION

Prepare for the End

"Cute," Hawkeye said. "You got a dental plan?"

Hawkeye slipped the card into one of his front pockets and turned to go. Tigra, Wonder Man, US Agent and Cannonball followed. 'One thing Slyde said was right,' Samuel Guthrie thought to himself, 'today may well be the first day of the rest of my life.'

They entered the Quinjet and then the West Coast Avengers were gone.

END WCA 107

WEST COAST LINES

send comments to mariner2@tiac.net

Well, this was unexpected.

I hadn't planned on taking over the writing chores on this title for a long time to come. But original MV1 AWC-writer Scott Chamberlain has stepped away from MV1. Don't worry for Scott, he and his wife are awaiting the birth of their first child! Everyone at MV1 wishes you well, beezer, and we wish only the

best for your family and hope you return to our writing ranks some day.

So the West Coast Avengers titles, this and HAWKEYE , have taken on new writers. I'll be handling this title and Lonni Holland will be taking over HAWKEYE . For those who know Lonni, you know that she's rather fond of the Avenging Archer and her presence writing that book has intimidated me to no end. Just check out HAWKEYE # 10 - her first issue as the new writer - to see what I mean.

My joy to be writing this title - West Coast Avengers was my favorite title growing up as a kid, first comic I ever got a letter printed in, too * - is tempered by beezer not being here. Our stories are bound to be different and no matter how good or bad my issues are, there will always be the question of "What If ... beezer hadn't left?"

*** First person who can tell me what issue it was in gets an MV1 No Prize.**

I hope you enjoy what I bring to this book. Scott was really starting to roll with this book and his presence is going to be missed. Like all my MV1 writings (Fantastic Four, All God's Children, Tales to Astonish), I'll try to bring something different to the Whackos. But it's going to take a few issues to find the groove on a team book again, especially when one is handed to you unexpectedly. Please bare with me. I've got what I think are a lot of truly great ideas lined up for the WCA and I only hope the stories can live up to them.

I'm sure a question you readers have is why the apparent shift in the line-up. There are two reasons for this. The foremost reason is that I don't know Living Lightning, Magdalene or Swordsman II enough

to write about them and ignoring that does a disservice to the characters and readership. Miguel is staying here as a reserve while I do some research on him, but I've let Swordsman and Magdalene go, both of which will soon surface in a Barry Reese project. There are more changes to come in the roster situation. Another writer has expressed interest in two of the folks still here and since I know he's wanted one of them for a while and likes the other more than I do, I've given the okay for them to leave.

But I'm not saying who. You've got to keep reading for that. ;-) There will be additions to the roster as well, characters that, honestly, I have more of an interest in writing than the folks I'm letting go. I hope, as readers, you understand. The characters that I've gotten the chance to bring in are too good to pass up, I feel, and should lend to many classic Avenger tales. I'll be honest about the roster situation. I don't mind a flexible line-up. If you want to see the same seven characters here for the next 50 issues, you're going to be disappointed. I see being an AVENGER as a lifetime commitment. No matter what your roster status, once an Avenger, always an Avenger. And I plan on using them all if I get the opportunity. But don't worry, there will be a core group as a centerpiece that will feature some long-time Avengers, some never before Avengers and some Avengers that never really got the chance to stick around.

As for what kinds of stories will you see here? Hey, this is an AVENGERS book. You'll get your mind-blowing epics, don't fear. But you're going to get stories that aren't often shown in AVENGERS, too. Scott Harris is cranking out epic after epic over in the main title, so I want to do things a little differently

here. But just like Scott, I'm not going to shy away from making changes and shaking up the status-quo. My only goal is to tell good stories.

Thanks for listening everyone, and I'll see you all Next Issue. Send any and all comments to the e-mail address above. Be sure to check out Lonni's debut with HAWKEYE # 10 and try to drop beezers a line to thank him for his MV1 work and wish him and his family well.

In closing, I'd just like to say thanks, once again, to Van for starting MV1 up way back when (has it really been over a year?). I'd also just like to mention how much fun it's been so far working with Lonni. Beyond her love for Hawkeye, Lonni is an extremely talented writer, and one who is a joy to bounce ideas off of. We're working to make HAWKEYE and WCA as good as they possibly can be. One last thing before I go, when I mentioned up above that WCA was my favorite book as a kid, it was all because of the man this issue is dedicated to, Steve Englehart . And while it won't say it every issue, you can consider every issue of this series that I write to carry that same dedication tag.

-- Mark ... 21.January.99

NEXT ISSUE: WEST COAST AVENGERS # 108 - CITIZEN'S ARREST - As Cannonball mulls over membership, US Agent gets a call from a friend in the US government that leads to a major drug bust. But all is not as it seems in the City of Angels and the Whackos find themselves wondering if they've done good ... or if they've been used.

Also this month: HAWKEYE # 11 by Lonni Holland! See what happens when a few of the ladies from Clint's past make an unexpected appearance and

bring about some unusual results. Check it out at the Avengers Branch!

NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS

WEST COAST AVENGERS 108 Plot Summary

WEST COAST AVENGERS

108



MV1

August, Year 3

CITIZEN'S ARREST

written by Mark Bousquet

DEDICATED TO AL MILGROM

And there came a day ... HAWKEYE! WONDER MAN! TIGRA! US AGENT! CANNONBALL? These are the WEST COAST AVENGERS!

Previously ... After a hard fought win against the Crimson Cowl's Masters of Evil, Hawkeye and the Whackos regrouped to put down a roster. The end result left the WCA with the following: Hawkeye as Chairman with Wonder Man, US Agent and Tigra as full-time Avengers. Living Lightning, sighting his wish

to devote his time to finishing college, remains a reserve Avenger. Jolt and Shape have been invited to stay at the Compound, but neither hold Avengers status. After aiding the former New Mutant and X-Man Cannonball capture the villain Slyde, Hawkeye, with the full support of Tigra, Agent and Wonder Man, offered Cannonball a place on the roster.

Prologue - San Diego Wharf District - Two Days Ago - 1:38 AM PST

The warm night sat on San Diego, comforting it's citizens.

A small freighter pulled into it's port, ready to unload it's cargo. There were no workers dockside, not at this hour. The cargo, which the ship's registry said consisted of cocoa beans, bananas and pottery, could mostly wait until morning.

But not everything on the boat could.

Two men, dressed in black, slid open the large garage doors of a warehouse. Two more men sat inside a large flatbed truck and backed the vehicle up to the ship. As the warehouse doors were closed, a fifth man moved a crane into position above the deck of the ship, and hoisted up a large, wooden stack of crates that was waiting on deck.

As the boxes were lifted off the deck and onto the flatbed truck, three of the shiphands on board the ship cursed the fates, resigned to watching the crates strapped down and covered with a green tarp.

The five men in black boarded the flatbed truck and disappeared into the San Diego night.

AVENGERS COMPOUND - Present

"So, did a big fight go down here, or did the Thing lose a card game?" Samuel Guthrie, the hero known as Cannonball, asked as he looked around the damaged grounds of the Compound.

"Masters of Evil," Tigra, US Agent and Hawkeye said with a sigh as they sat down by the circular table inside the main meeting room.* The Compound was damaged, not to the point where they couldn't use it, but in definite need of repair.

*** See AWC 104 - 106 for the beezer penned tale! - Under Siege Mark**

"Crazed enemies crashing the headquarters? Ah can relate," Sam grinned.

"So this guy gets to join up but I can't?" came the accusatory voice of the former Thunderbolt, Jolt, real name, Hallie Takahama. "Gimme a break, this guy can't be much older than me."

"Cannonball, meet Jolt," Hawkeye sighed, pointing to the diminutive teen-ager. "And, FYI, young lady," he leveled a finger at Hallie, "Cannonball isn't sure he even wants to sign up, so you're both here officially as trainees. Nothing more. Neither of you have Avengers status."

"But he can just say yes and he's in, right? But I've got to earn my keep?" Jolt seethed.

"Look, Jolt," Hawkeye said, exasperated. "Cannonball's been in this game a long time now. He's been a member of the New Mutants, X-Force and the X-Men. The only group you've been a part of is the Thunderbolts - a criminal group led by Baron Zemo I needn't remind anyone. Forgive me for not rolling out the red carpet for you like we've done with Cannonball - a respected hero."

"Huh," Jolt's eyes burned holes at Hawkeye. "According to the US government, I've been a member of a criminal group, yeah, I admit that. But," she accused, pointing at Cannonball, "he's been a member of three."

Hallie turned and stormed out of the room.

"Wonderful," Hawkeye groaned, rubbing the back of his head. "Nothing better than twisted logic. Remind me never to have kids ..."

Tigra and Agent smiled as Cannonball looked on, scratching his head.

The Quarters of Wonder Man

Imagine that you were Simon Williams, the long-time Avenger known as Wonder Man and you were laying on your bed, staring at the ceiling.

Imagine that you were going through a mid-life crisis.

Imagine that the woman you love with every fiber of your being, Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch, doesn't love you. Worse, she doesn't love anybody, apparently, so the part of your heart that you had set aside for Wanda has continued to keep a single candle of hope burning bright.

Fool.

If she only loved somebody, at least you could deal with the notion that Wanda would rather be with him, as opposed to you. But since she's with no one ... that meant, given a choice between you and nothing, she chose nothing.

Nothing.

And you're less than that.

Imagine that all you lived for didn't feel the same for you.

Would you want to continue with this whole Avenging thing where every turn, every face, somehow reminded you of that?

AVENGERS COMPOUND - Meeting Room

Hawkeye, Tigra, US Agent and Cannonball sat around the center table, getting the Avengers business for the day out of the way.

"Okay, then," Hawkeye shook his head, "now that Jolt's made her point - whatever it was - let's finish off the

business at hand."

"I want pizza," Agent joked.

"Sounds good," Hawkeye smiled. "I'll make the call as soon as we're done. First thing, Cannonball-"

"Sam."

"You don't need to do that," Hawkeye quickly pointed out. "Revealing secret IDs isn't part of the Avengers Charter."

"Doesn't matter," Sam shrugged. "All the X-Men know who ah am, and ah don't wear a mask. Besides," he smiled, "Cannonball takes too long to say. Name's Sam Guthrie."

Introductions were made around the table, and Hawkeye and US Agent couldn't help but smile as they pulled off their masks. "Damn things are a pain," Agent cracked, but the sentiment was real.

"Okay, then," Clint got back to business, "Sam's officially just a guest until he makes up his mind. You can stay in one of the bungalows outside, or one of the rooms inside. Just take a look around and let us know."

"Just stay clear of Mopey's room," Tigra joked about the missing Wonder Man, her eyes sparkling at Sam.

"Second matter is this card that Slyde handed us," Clint continued, dropping the card on the center table. "It reads: 'THE ENLIGHTENMENT FOUNDATION: Prepare for the End.' Thoughts on the group?"

"Slyde's a member, we needn't worry," Agent quipped, then continued more seriously. "We can input the data into the records and run checks with the usual suspects: SHIELD, Interpol, the FF, the X-Men if they're playing nice today," he smiled at Sam, "and so on. See if there's anything that matches the name or the style of the EF."

"Sounds good," Clint nodded. "Third, I don't think it's too much to say that we've got roster concerns. Wonder Man's our only heavy hitter, and it's clear he's not operating at his

best. The three of us, while unbelievably great at what we do," Clint grinned, "aren't bastions of power. Skill counts, but it's not a bad idea to have some big guns, too. Not to mention a scientist."

"Most ex-Avengers are tied up somewhere," Agent continued. "Between the East Coast branch, the Champions, Force Works, the Crusaders, the Defenders, She-Hulk was with the FF for awhile, Pietro and Crystal are leading the Knights of Wundagore ... it's becoming a crowded ball-field out there."

"Right, and when you combine that with the ex-Avengers that aren't around - like Starfox - or have moved onto other things - like Swordsman and Magdalene - it's no wonder we're having a hard time filling our roster slots." Clint shook his head. "Let's run a check to see who's out there - there's gotta be a couple older Avengers willing to come back and serve. Any other suggestions on possible roster additions?"

"We could ask Thor about another Asgardian," Agent offered. "They've got some power."

"That's a thought," Hawkeye nodded. "The Lady Sif might make a good Avenger. Sam, anyone you can suggest from the x-portions of the world?"

"Ah can call around and do some checking, if you'd like. Ah hear X-Force has regrouped, and the X-Men are always in a state of flux, but ah can check." *

*** For the latest on X-FORCE, check out the just launched X-FORCE on the Four Corners Branch. à Dropping a Hint Mark ...**

"Enough, guys," Tigra whined while still managing to smile. "It's late, I'm hungry."

"Okay, okay, so noted. Meeting adjourned. Feel free to take in the grounds, Sam. And Tigra," Clint smiled, "keep your paws off him."

Tigra smiled back widely and walked away, not needing to turn around to know that there were three sets of eyes on her furry backside.

Downtown Los Angeles - Yesterday - 3:35 AM PST

The warm night sat on Los Angeles, oppressing it's citizens.

To be outside was to sweat. To sweat was to invite the smog to stick to your skin.

Five men, dressed in black were outside this night, sweating, their skin becoming acquainted with the grime of a dirty city. They did not complain, or even notice the heat. They had a job to do and they would do it.

They had parked their truck next to an abandoned warehouse and were busy entering and exiting the building, carrying the load in piece-mail from truck to grimy floor.

It took them twenty-six minutes to finish.

When they were done, one of the five walked to a phone that hung on the far wall of the warehouse. He picked up the phone and dialed the number that was engraved in his memory. A voice on the other hand answered, "Allo?"

"The package of snowflakes have been delivered. Tell Councilman Proctor to make the payments to the Panamanian account."

"Copy."

The five men in black boarded the flatbed truck and disappeared into the Los Angeles night.

AVENGERS COMPOUND - PRESENT

"Earth to Pietro, come in Pietro. Earth to Pietro, come in Pietro."

"May I help you, sir? It's Hawkeye, is it not?" answered a grey headed being.

"Yep. I'm looking for the guy with the white hair. He's probably frowning," Hawkeye grinned at the large monitor screen above him. He wanted to get away from the Compound for a bit, but first he figured he might as well put a call in to Quicksilver and Crystal. * "You're one of Knights of Wundagore, right?"

*** See HAWKEYE # 11 - Continuity Conscious Mark ...**

"I am, sir. My name is Sir Delphis," answered the High Evolutionary-evolved dolphin. "I'm a scientist, so you can imagine my despair at being forced to partake in monitor duty."

"I hear ya," Hawkeye grinned.

"Without being too rude, Sir Hawkeye," Delphis leaned closer to the screen and lowered his voice, "I can only hope you have plans to ask Sir Quicksilver to rejoin the Avengers. I fear that, despite his noble intentions, he's not happy here."

"Is Pietro ever happy?" Hawkeye asked, genuinely concerned.

"Oh, yes. When he was reunited with his wife, he was quite pleasant. * But now ... he is a complex man, Sir Hawkeye. Due to the nature of his powers, he sees the world in slow motion, so it's only natural that his attention span would seem to be short, when matched up with the rest of ours. But it's more than that ... he feels ... stifled, I think. There's not much to do here, not enough to keep him busy, at the least. I believe he needs the challenges a situation like being in the Avengers affords him. It keeps him occupied."

*** See FANTASTIC FOUR # 419 - Nostalgic Mark ...**

Hawkeye said nothing for a bit, thinking. "Poor guy. I don't think we realize often enough just how difficult life must be for Pietro. Not that it excuses him for being an ass half the time," Hawkeye grinned.

"Of course not, sir," Delphis smiled back.

"Well, let him know I called, will you?" Hawkeye asked. "Tell him I need to talk to him."

"I will do so when he returns," Delphis acquiesced.

"One more thing," Hawkeye added. "Tell him it's Avengers business. Let's see if that gets a reaction out of him."

Elsewhere in the Compound ...

"Shape like pizza!"

"Yeah, yeah, we all do shiny-top," Agent mumbled. "We just don't announce it every other bite."

"Hey, leave him alone," Tigra purred, rubbing a furry hand over Shape's bald head. She winked at Agent, "Besides, Jack, the more he tells us how much he likes it, the less he eats."

"Shape love pizza!"

"Bet you do, big guy," Tigra laughed.

Jack nearly fell off the couch he was laughing so hard, "You kill me, Tigra!" Sam and Tigra chuckled to themselves, enjoying the hot pizza.

"It's too bad Hawk- ah mean, Clint - couldn't be here," said Sam around a mouthful of cheese.

"Aw, that old man?" Jack scoffed. "He said he needed some down time and couldn't join us. Said we should all try to spend some time away from this place to keep ourselves grounded. You ask me," Jack said off-handedly, "it's because this place still reminds him of Bobbi. And he's still not over her."

Tigra nearly dropped her pizza. "Don't go there, Jack," said sternly.

Two things were about to happen. Sam was going to ask who Bobbi was and Jack was going to ask why he shouldn't

bring it up. Neither happened because, at that moment, the phone rang.

"I got it," Jack mumbled, stomping over to the phone. "What we need is a bright, shiny red phone like Commissioner Gordon used to have. Yeah, Aveng-," Jack's face went dead serious.

"What do you think it is?" Sam whispered to Tigra.

"Dunno," she responded, taking the opportunity to slide a little closer to Sam. She made sure to brush her tail up against the back of his legs and delighted in the slight start he gave. "It's gotta be a personal call, though. We're not supposed to give out the non-security phone numbers. Everything's supposed to come through the switchboard."

Agent's face was stone cold serious. "Yes, sir. I understand, sir. I realize that, sir. You did the right thing, sir, reaching me at this number instead of the normal channels. Absolutely, sir. It'll be taken care of. Yes, sir, the Avengers will be there. No room in my city for scum, sir."

Jack hung up the phone and stared hard at Tigra and Sam. "Get your gear on. Meet me at the Hangar in five minutes."

"What's up?" Tigra asked, but Jack was already out the door. "Hey, shouldn't we call Clint?" she called after him.

Sam looked at Tigra, his eyebrows raised, "That happens a lot here, doesn't it?"

"What's that?" Tigra asked.

"Dramatic exits."

"Oh yes," Tigra smiled. "It's tradition. Check this one out," she purred low as she turned and headed out the room, her tail wiggling back and forth, like a cobra in the thralls of a snake charmer.

Sam had to laugh to himself. Life was good.

Downtown Los Angeles - 10:07 PM PST

The doors of a debilitated warehouse busted wide open, US Agent the man to blame.

"What the hell is this?" he boomed to the one man standing by a group of wooden crates.

"Who are you?" a small, roundish man asked, his voice wavering.

"Who am I?" Agent growled as he strode into the building. "I'm the US Agent, pal and we're the West Coast Avengers. The real question is who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I'm Councilman Michael Proctor," the man answered with confidence despite the fact that Agent towered over him. "This warehouse is owned by my charity group, Helping Hands, and I was trying to figure out what these large crates are doing here when you illegally broke in. I got a call-"

"I know you, Proctor. Mr. Big Shot on the city council. Got all these fancy ideas about improving the inner cities. What you're telling me, is that you're the man in charge, Councilman?" Agent asked, scorn in his voice. "Wonder Man, check the crates."

Simon sighed, but walked to the large wooden crates, oblivious to the look of concern on Tigra and Cannonball's face.

"This is an illegal search," the Councilman protested, staring up into Jack's hardened face.

"We're the Avengers, pal," Agent answered, his voice strong and confident. "And if that's what I think it is in those crates, you're going away for a long time. Councilman." Agent nearly spit out the last word. Sam thought he might deck the smaller man and unconsciously prepared to stop Agent if he tried anything.

"Looks like your tip was right," Simon cut in from an open crate. "Cocaine. All the way."

"What?" Councilman Proctor asked, stunned.

"You sure?" Agent asked, smiling at the Councilman, who stood there with a shocked look on his face. Agent and Councilman Proctor didn't even realize a news crew had entered the building through the open door Agent had kicked in.

"I'm not going to taste it, Agent," Simon scolded, "but I've been to enough Hollywood parties to have a pretty good idea that this stuff is the goods."

"Fancy that," Agent leered above Councilman Proctor.

"It's not mine," Proctor protested, suddenly noticing the camera crew. "Hey, you can't be in here, either! This is an illegal search!"

A lithe female pushed herself closer to US Agent. "This is Carla Gregory reporting live from the scene of an abandoned warehouse in Los Angeles. Acting on a tip provided to the Super Channel by an anonymous source, we've arrived just in time to see the West Coast Avengers discover what appears to be crate loads of cocaine being stored in this warehouse that Councilman Proctor had bought and planned to turn into a community recreation center."

Agent looked right into the camera as he grabbed the Councilman. "Councilman Michael Proctor, I, US Agent, leader of the West Coast Avengers places you under arrest for the possession of cocaine with the intent to sell. Nothing wrong with fixing up the neighborhoods, Councilman, but selling drugs to do it makes me sick. You're busted."

As Agent led the protesting man away to the sirens that had begun to flash outside the warehouse, Sam and Tigra exchanged nervous glances.

"Hooray for the good guys?" Sam asked Tigra and Wonder Man. "Why do ah not feel good?"

"Cause someone just used us as stooges," Wonder Man answered angrily, showing a rare sign of life. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I wish Clint was here. Where the heck is he, anyways?" Simon asked, looking around as if he just realized Hawkeye wasn't there.

"No idea," Tigra answered evenly. * "But I don't like that Agent didn't call him and I don't like how he just referred to himself as leader of the West Coast Avengers."

*** See HAWKEYE # 11 - Inevitable Plug Mark ...**

"Hawkeye's going to be ripping when he gets back," Sam sighed. "Even ah can guess that."

Los Angeles County Jail - 11:58 PST

Councilman Michael Proctor sat with his head slumped into his hands inside a jail cell. He couldn't believe what had happened. Who would frame him with that cocaine? In the rec center-to-be, of all places.

"Bad news, Michael," Proctor's attorney, Thomas Reilly relayed to his client. "They have the cocaine in your warehouse, that you knew. But ..." he looked at papers he'd only recently been handed, "they've got a phone call coming to the Helping Hands Project, traced back to that warehouse. Worse, there was a tap on the phone and they have an unidentified voice telling someone pretty clearly that a shipment of cocaine has arrived. If you've got any bright ideas, I suggest you use them on your phone call."

Councilman Proctor sighed as he rose from his chair. He picked up the phone that the police had left on the small desk in the room. A phone in Harlem rang three times before there was an answer.

"Hello," came the groggy voice. "And this better be good, it's almost three in the morni-"

"Sam! It's Mike, here. I'm in trouble. Big trouble."

"Gotcha," the voice in NYC answered. "I'll be on a plane first thing." Sam Wilson hung up the phone and walked to his closet to pack. Michael Proctor was one of the finest men he knew and if he was in trouble, Sam was going to do everything he could to help him.

The Falcon was on his way to the West Coast.

END WCA 108

WEST COAST LINES

send comments to mariner2@tiac.net

Hrm ... guess that roster isn't finalized yet, is it? <g> Quite a bit of mail came in for 107 - a pleasant and nice surprise - so let's get right into the letters. Fittingly, the first letter printed is from the previous writer of this series.

From Scott Chamberlain

It was WCA #14. Now, where's my no-prize? ;)

Coincidentally, WCA was -also- the book I got my first letter printed

in... Now, on to my comments.

Good first issue. I know I left you and Lonni in a kind of pickle,

leaving abruptly. But I think you did pretty well. Slyde was an

interesting choice to play villain... I like the idea of Cannonball on

the team. When I read that I just... "Yeah... Yeah, man. That's good

stuff." I've always liked him, one of the few X-persons I can stomach.

Having Jolt sent off to school and hanging around to learn from the team

is, well, eerily similar to what I had in mind. Hmmmm...
You been

reading my notes? :)

I'm truly sorry to see Magdalene and Swordsy go. Those
two were going to

be my pet project. The fact that know one knew about
them and their past

was pretty much blank made them very appealing to me
in that I could

fill al of that in with whatever I wanted. Still, I understand
your

reasoning in letting them go. I'm also quite mollified by
the fact that

they'll be appearing in Barrys new book.

In any event, early indications are that you're heading in
the right

direction. As a fellow Long-time WCA fan, I feel quite
comfortable with

this book in your hands an look forward to seeing where
this ride is

heading. I've already got my seat belt on.

DINGDINGDINGDING!!! We have a winner! Award the No-Prize to Scooter! Yes, it's true, my first letter printed in a comic was in none other than WCA # 14 . But Scott says his first letter was printed in WCA, as well ... so we'll make that our next contest! Anyone who can tell me (and I don't know, so beez will have to help us out ;-) when Scott's letter was printed gets another No-Prize!

Glad you like the inclusion of Cannonball. I had him dibbed for another project, but when that fell through, this seemed like a natural fit. As for my

plans with Jolt ... chances are our plans aren't the same, but you're going to have to keep reading to find out what they are. <g> Swordsman and Magdalene were hard to let go, but given who I've got coming in, and given that I knew so little about them, I thought I'd be better off freeing them up for another writer to use.

Thanks for all the kind words, Scott. Hope what I've got coming is enjoyable for you.

From Randy Lander,

While I could definitely tell this was a transition issue (and ditching

that feel entirely would have been next to impossible), it was still a

solid one, and I'm intrigued by the team you're setting up here. Before

I go on to lavish praise on you, one quick request: Try and strike a

balance between "aw, shucks" Cannonball and hard-ass X-Force leader

Cannonball. There are valid parts to each incarnation, and it's a shame

to lose either one, as they did when he was in the X-Men.

Now, on with the praise. Your Hawkeye, while not as dead-on perfect as

Lonni's, is pretty damn good. The U.S. Agent bickering has just the

right tinge of jerkness to it, too. And the Enlightenment Foundation shows

great promise.

Finally, you are the master of the plug. One for me in the Vault, a

couple for Lonni, one for Neil's Scarlet Witch LS (I really need to read

that at some point)...

In short...it's not as mind-blowingly amazing as AGC, but I don't expect

it to be. But it's a solid beginning, and I'm looking forward to more.

Yeah, it was a transition issue. Even more, this is my first foray back into current MV1 in-continuity writing since I've spent so long off in the future with ALL GOD'S CHILDREN and time writing past stories with TALES TO ASTONISH . So it may take a couple issues to find my groove again.

As for Cannonball, fear not, he's not going to play the dopey "golly gee, Wally" character he was in Marvel's X-MEN. He's a veteran, he knows his stuff, he'll fit right in.

And to be honest, I don't plan on this being as good as AGC, but I don't have anywhere near the canvas available to me here as I do there. I hope this is fun for folks, though.

And lastly, a review, posted to the mv1talk list by Barry BLACK KNIGHT Reese ...

WEST COAST AVENGERS # 107 : Mark Bousquet's debut issue is a strong

one. I love MBQ's FF stories so it's obvious that the guy knows team

books. The lineup still seems a bit weak, but that's understandable

since so many characters are dibbed elsewhere. Still, I'd like to

somebody like Quicksilver rejoin at some point. Shape's dialogue was

great, esp. the Hawkman gags. Very funny. Cannonball in the Avengers?

Interesting. I'm not a big fan of Sam Guthrie and I hope he won't be

all 'gosh-wow' like Justice is in the 'real' Avengers, but I'm curious. Definitely looking forward to more.

Barry has hit on a valid point: the strength of the line-up. Tigra, US Agent, Living Lightning, Jolt ... fine characters in their own rights, but not exactly a strong Avengers line-up when put together. At least not in my hands. All I can say is that I'm pleased with the line-up that I'll eventually have, and that includes folks that will start arriving next issue. I guarantee that Cannonball will not be written like the MU Justice. This is a big step for him, but he won't be in awe of where he is. As for Quicksilver ... if he was home to answer the phone, he'd have been here this issue. <g>

Thanks for the review Barry (and the kind words for my old FF stories) and thanks to everyone else who wrote in or read the issue. We'll get to more letters about 107 next issue. As always, you can write me at mariner2@tiac.net with any comments. Thanks everyone!

Also this month: HAWKEYE # 12 by Lonni Holland ... Two-Gun Kid. Nuff Said.

NEXT ISSUE: WEST COAST AVENGERS # 109 - WORLD WITHOUT, PART ONE: BURN

"Don't guess," ordered the Commander. "Tell me."

A bead of sweat trickled off the American's brow. "Pacific Coast of North America, sir." She blinked at her screen. "Sir! If the falling object continues along it's present trajectory it's going to impact ..." - more

punching into the keyboard as the map in front of her zoomed in closer - "... a spot of woods south of Los Angeles at ... 1800 Palos Verdes Drive ..."

The man in charge blinked. "Avengers Compound."

-- Biscuit ... 1.February.1999

NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS

WEST COAST AVENGERS 109 Plot Summary

WEST COAST AVENGERS

109



MV1 - Northern Bear Productions

September, Year 3

WORLD WITHOUT

written by Mark Bousquet

***AVENGERS ASSEMBLE! - And there came a day ...
Hawkeye! Wonder Man! Tigra! US Agent! Cannonball?
These are the WEST COAST AVENGERS!!!***

Previously ... Acting on a tip from someone he trusts, and taking advantage of Hawkeye's absence, US Agent leads the WCA and Cannonball on a drug bust, making a citizen's arrest on Los Angeles city Councilman Michael Proctor, who was caught with mass quantities of cocaine inside a warehouse that he owned and plans on turning into a community recreation center. Councilman Proctor has called in

his long time friend Sam Wilson, aka the former Avenger known as the Falcon.

PART ONE: BURN

Can you hear it?

The word whispers in the shadows of the wind. It reverberates, an echo in the cosmos and it's getting louder.

Can you hear it?

Listen, but not too closely. Concentration isn't needed, but calmness. You need to become attuned to the winds to ready yourself for the next time the word slips past you.

Did you hear it? Just then? No? Were you listening too closely? Were you trying too hard to grasp the echo of a million voices? I thought I told you to relax. Yes, that's it, let yourself go. Relax, open your mind ... but don't listen for it. It's a sound, but you won't hear this word with your ears.

You'll feel it deep inside and you'll know that something out there is making the galaxy a darker place.

Can you hear it?

It ripples outward from the center, tendrils reaching out, giving you a glimpse of your future. It's a word that has shaken your world a thousand times, because it represents a man that no one - no one - doesn't fear when they look into that mirror.

There are many evil beings in the Everything, and many that are better known throughout the galaxies, but to every being that has encountered him, there is no one - no one - that worries them more than this single man.

Can you hear it?

The voice of twenty planets, deep inside the Shi'ar Empire, shout the name of their Conqueror. One man who has taken whatever he chose. One man who has conquered planets. Not destroyed them like Galactus, but conquered them. Enslaved them. Bended them to his will.

Can you hear it?

AVENGERS COMPOUND

"Just who the hell do you think you are?!?"

As he stumbles backwards, Jack Walker, the US Agent, wonders exactly what it is he's done that could possibly get the Falcon this upset.

"Cool it, Sam!" Tigra shouted, leaping across a couch with all the grace you'd expect from a woman who looked like a big, furry humanoid-cat. Sam Guthrie, Cannonball, couldn't believe what he'd seen. No, not Tigra's tail, though there was something ... mesmerizing about the way it flowed, almost with a life of it's own. The Falcon had entered the Compound, appearing quite calm, walked over to US Agent and slugged him right in the face.

"Back off, Tigra," the Falcon stuck up his hand. "I'm okay. I just want to know," he seethed as he took a step towards Agent, "what this piece of scum thinks he was doing arresting Councilman Proctor in front of a national audience on SCN?"*

*** Last Issue -- Self Referencing Mark ...**

Jack was on his feet. The blow had hurt, but only because he wasn't expecting it. He was angry, but so far still in control, "Wow, I've been sucker punched by the Falcon. The original 'Avenger no one wanted.' We're like brothers."

"Cain and Abel, perhaps," Falcon answered, gritting through his teeth.

"Good thing you sucker punched me, Falcon," Agent shot back, taking a step forward to get into Falcon's chest. "If we ever went at it for real, you'd be sucking birdseed through a straw."

"That's enough!" Tigra ordered as she stepped in between them. "Cool it. You've got no right to come in here and just start punching people, Sam."

Falcon and Agent didn't back down and neither looked at Tigra. "You arrested an innocent man, Agent."

"Oh yeah? Was that, or was that not, cocaine?"

"Michael says it's not his."

"Michael? What, this guy's a pal of yours? Sweet little scam he's got running. Stealing from the junkies to feed the poor."

"The only scam he's involved in is the one that's used you - and the Avengers - as puppets to arrest an innocent man."

Tigra was pushing on both chests, but neither was backing down. She shot Sam - Cannonball - a look across the room and shook her head as he was about to step forward to help. Sam didn't intervene. Tigra wanted to do this her way and he'd play along. For a while, at least.

"Think you can take me, Falcon?" Agent challenged. "I don't see your little bird sidekick hanging arou- OW!" Agent's hand shot to his ear and he looked around with wild eyes. Falcon didn't smile as his bird, Redwing, came to rest on his outstretched arm.

Tigra looked at Agent, then back to Falcon, then back to Agent, but she was too slow. Agent hurled

himself passed Tigra at Falcon, who crouched into a defensive position, ready to meet Agent's charge. Redwing flapped upwards, hovering in mid-air, ready to strike.

But Agent never made it as his body jerked suddenly to the right, like he was caught and tossed to the ground by the wind.

"I hear Hawkeye's looking for me," came the strong, deep voice that stood above Agent's body, a hint of a European accent lacing his English. "Can we cease the childish games until after then?"

Quicksilver had returned to the Avengers.

THE PLANET GI'JORNIA - INSIDE THE SHI'AR EMPIRE

Her name is not important.

She took hammer and nail and set metal to wood, further securing the wall of her new house.

Her old house remained only as a pile of rubble, destroyed by their new Emperor. She cared not - one Emperor or another, they were all the same to her. This one, however, had demanded they all rebuild their houses in the style of his homeland.

Wherever that was.

As she stood upon a ladder in the hot afternoon, she caught a sound brought in from the western winds and she stopped to look in that direction. It was the direction of the capital city.

"Can you hear it?" she called down to her now fatherless daughter.

The girl, who hadn't spoken a word since she saw the stranger snap her father's neck like a twig, nodded yes. Her mother came down from the ladder and held her daughter close.

**"I can hear it, mamma," the girl spoke at long last.
"I'm scared."**

AVENGERS COMPOUND

"This is no business of yours, Pietro," Falcon admonished Quicksilver as Agent slowly got to his feet.

"Two Avengers ready to throw fists at another and it's not my business?" Quicksilver scoffed. "I've been an Avenger longer than everyone in this room. Combined. I've made it my business, Falcon." Agent and Falcon seethed at Pietro, but neither said a word. "Now, where's Hawkeye?"

"He's not here," Tigra sighed, upset that Agent and Falcon had ignored her.

"What's going on out here?" Simon Williams, Wonder Man, asked as he strolled into the room. "I'm in the - oh, hello Pietro."

"Simon," Quicksilver nodded politely.

Wonder Man felt something break inside him. Standing here in the living room was Quicksilver. Pietro. Pietro MAXIMOFF. Brother of Wanda Maximoff, otherwise known as the Scarlet Witch.

Otherwise known as the woman Simon loved above all else. A woman that did not return his love. Wanda's rejection of him was the cause of Simon's recent malaise. He was trying to get over her, but it was a failing mission. Seeing her brother standing here at the Compound only made it worse.

He had to ask himself again, did he really want to stay in a place where everything somehow reminded him of the woman who wouldn't return his love?

"It seems," Cannonball interjected, trying to bring everyone around to the same page, "that Falcon is

rather upset at the actions of US Agent in arresting that Councilman. It appears that he's a friend of the Falcon's."

"Figures," Simon shrugged. "Nothing we can do about it now."

"We can - we will - prove his innocence," Falcon said flatly, though all could tell he was still burning inside. "You three - he pointed to Cannonball, Tigra and Wonder Man - were there, too. As far as I'm concerned, you're just as guilty as Agent is."

"For the love of god!" Tigra let out. "Easy with the High and Mighty attitude, Falcon! What were we supposed to do? Let the guy go? We didn't know he was your friend, and even if we did, we found crate loads of cocaine in his warehouse."

"You were set up," Falcon said evenly.

"We were supposed to know that?" Tigra asked angrily.

"You tell him, girl," Agent encouraged.

"Oh, zip it, Jack!" Tigra turned on Agent. "You get word from some secret government contact about something like this, you call the police. You don't take a Quinjet and play John Wayne!"

"Watch it, cat," Agent fumed.

Sam Guthrie looked across the room at Quicksilver, who sighed disgustedly and shrugged. Welcome to the Avengers, he seemed to be saying.

SNAP! FSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSHHHHHHHHHHHH!

The room filled suddenly with smoke. The Avengers all fell into defensive positions, turning towards the nearest door. Quicksilver, a mutant with the power of acceleration, spun his hands in tight circles, blowing the smoke gently away.

Standing in the doorway, with a sour look on his face, was a man that looked like he hadn't shaved in five days, the West Coast Avengers chairman, Hawkeye. "Alright, exactly what in the name of Hell is going on here?" *

That's when the explosion rocked the Compound.

**** Why is Hawkeye the way he is? Check out the OLD WEST Sage that started over in HAWKEYE # 12 - Old West Mark ...***

EARTH ORBIT

I'm going to tell you a secret.

If the governments of Earth knew of what I'm telling you, they would hunt you down and imprison you until you told them everything you knew. Then, maybe, they would release you. But don't count on it.

You see, they don't know any of this, but they would want to.

Somewhere up here, circling the Earth, undetected by any scanners, rests a space station of alien design. It's new, in orbit only a week Earth time, but it's going to upset a lot of people on the small blue planet it circles.

Uatu, the Watcher, knows it exists, but he's not talking. Watchers are funny that way.

This station is going to make some changes down below that are going to upset a lot of people. Understand, this station isn't bound by any governmental rules. It reports to no nation. All it wants is to make the world a changed, and hopefully, better place.

The few people who have taken up residence in the space station have dubbed it ... the LIGHTHOUSE.

Come, have a peek inside ...

"We've got a large energy fluctuation in lower orbit making haywire out of our radar units, sir!" came the excited voice of a young man who, until recently, performed a similar function at Star City, the Russian version of NASA.

"Nuclear?" asked the Commander, a man who, until recently, was a strict follower of a Dream.

"Negative, sir," answered the tech. "Readouts indicate it's of spatial and possibly temporal origin. Computer analysis indicates that's it's most likely-"

"Thor."

"Yes, sir," gulped the Russian tech. "How did you know?"

"Look at your screen again. Source of the ripple is the size of a man. That much energy coming out of that small an object ... Thor is the best guess." The Dreamer furrowed his brow. "Plot the course of the falling body. Tell me where it's going to land."

Another tech, this one an American and former employee of a large software company belted quickly on her dark grey keyboard. "Best guess, sir-"

"Don't guess," ordered the Commander. "Tell me."

A bead of sweat trickled off the American's brow. "Pacific Coast of North America, sir." She blinked at her screen. "Sir! If the falling object continues along it's present trajectory it's going to impact ..." - more punching into the keyboard as the map in front of her zoomed in closer - "... a spot of woods south of Los Angeles at ... 1800 Palos Verdes Drive ..."

The man in charge blinked. "Avengers Compound."

AVENGERS COMPOUND

To anyone watching, it looked like a star was falling from the sky.

Burning bright, like a meteor on fire from the velocity of descent, fell a man. He wasn't unconscious, but he was close. He struggled to stay aloft, struggled to use his hammer to slow his fall to the Earth, struggled to look where he fell.

Despite the pain that racked his body, despite the mental fatigue, he somehow managed to slow, but not stop, his descent. He was worthy to wield Mjolnir, afterall. Defeat was not an option. He noted, vaguely, that the ground was fast approach-

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The impact on the grounds of Avengers Compound sounded to all like an explosion. The assembled Avengers - Hawkeye, Wonder Man, Tigra, US Agent, Cannonball, Falcon and Quicksilver - sprinted for the back of their complex. Hawkeye sent Pietro to do a recon run around the grounds to check for damages. From one of the just knocked down bungalows, Shape and Jolt emerged, shaken.

A small impact crater sat in the woods, thirty feet in diameter. The West Coast Avengers arrived together and looked down into the crater to see a man, barely conscious, trying to wrest himself out of the impact zone.

Beta Ray Bill.

"Wonder Man, let's get him up," Hawkeye ordered, descending into the collapsed ground. Simon followed, jumping down to help the warrior to his feet.

"Unhhh ..." Bill moaned as his body was tugged upwards.

"Hang on," Hawkeye ordered and Simon gently lowered Bill back down. "What happened to you?" Hawkeye asked.

Beta Ray Bill moaned something, but Hawkeye couldn't hear him. He leaned in closer to Bill's large, dark orange face. "Come again, Bill?"

The Avengers could see Bill's lips move, whispering a few words, and then Hawkeye's face drained of blood. Beta Ray Bill fell unconscious. Hawkeye set his face and stood up, looking over to the Avengers.

"Quicksilver, get on the horn. Call everyone - and I mean everyone - and tell them to get here as quick as possible. The next time I shout Avengers Assemble I want to see every friendly face we've got. This is for real, folks. We've got worlds to save."

THE PLANET GI'JORNIA - INSIDE THE SHI'AR EMPIRE

The woman's name was not important.

But her daughter's was.

Her name was Xasha. A week ago she watched a man dressed in metal pick her father up by his throat and snap his neck like a twig. She had waited from that moment until ten seconds ago to speak - when she told her mother she was scared.

"I know, honey," her mother tried to comfort, but as the voices from the capital city grew louder she had to admit that she, too, was frightened.

Can you hear it?

The sound of a billion billion voices across twenty planets chanting together in the name of their new god. The winds carry the voices across the surface and out into space, heralding what is to come.

Can you hear it?

... DOOM! ... DOOM! ... DOOM!! ... DOOM!!! ... DOOM!!! ...

WORLD WITHOUT to be continued ...

WEST COAST LINES

send comments to mariner2@tiac.net

Our first letter this month comes from the writer of two new series here at MV1, X-FORCE and PROTECT AND SERVE ...

From Shawn Connolly:

Well, hot damn! Mark, I find myself enjoying your West Coast Avengers even more than I expected to... although I do have to note that if Cannonball decides not to stay with the Whackos, there'll always be a place for him back over in X-FORCE

(plug plug plug!).

I see you have a different take on Jolt than I would... I don't know if she'd still have that bright-eyed enthusiasm anymore... but, writer's prerogative. I look forward to seeing what you do with her. And then, of course, there is my FAVORITE whacko of all... the Shape! "Shape like sun!" BWAH HAH HAH!

And on that note, this is Shawn Connolly, signing off. Good day, and Odin bless.

Cannonball may or may not become available in the near future. <g> I don't see Jolt as bright-eyed and enthusiastic, either. I see here more as "Damnit, I deserve a spot here." and the fact that Hawkeye doesn't make her an Avenger is going to continue to be a sore spot for Hallie.

From Matt Turnage:

Hi, Mark. I just finished reading your first issue of AWC, and here's what I thought.

To be honest, the title, while funny, had me a little apprehensive. Invariably any new writer taking over a team book is going to make some changes in the lineup - it's merely a question of when and how much. Considering this

new incarnation of the Whackos had only been together for four issues before this point, I was afraid a sudden lineup shift might be inappropriate. However, I was very pleased to find that there was no major overhaul, and the changes were logical and didn't seem to significantly alter the makeup of the team.

That said, I hope we do see a constantly evolving lineup on this book. I feel that Roger Stern's run on Avengers was textbook - a lineup that, in retrospect, seemed to constantly change, but flowed without any sense of disruption. In other words, no big "Old Order Changeth" issues. Just people coming and going on occasion - like life. I like the addition of Cannonball, and trust you'll use him well. It was fun seeing a good loser villain like Slyde also. The characters are all well handled, although I'll confess I'm sick of Wonder Man behaving as he has been. But, that's the constraints of a shared universe - for the time being, you're bound by continuity to portray him as such. But please, break him out of that funk as soon as possible.

Some other thoughts on what I'd like to see for the general direction of this title: Fun. I want Avengers hanging out around the pool, having barbeques, going to movie premieres - doing the West Coast thing. Of course, the occasional earth-shattering epic is necessary, but in between I think the Whackos should take full advantage of their location.

A membership request: She may be tied up, but I think She-Hulk would make the ultimate Whacko. She's proved she's a great Avenger, she's a California girl, and I love it when she gets together with Hawkeye. My guess on what issue your first letter was printed: Some day I'm just going to have to bring my whole collection with me to school. I think it was in the low teens, but I can't remember for sure. I'll guess #14.

This title is an interesting change of pace for you, especially compared to All God's Children. I'm really looking forward to seeing what you're going to do with this type of series.

Thanks for the detailed letter, Matt. I'll try to touch on most of your points.

1) The Line-Up - The shift in the line-up is something I felt I needed to do. My knowledge/interest in some of the characters that beezers had knowledge/interest in are different than mine. Continuing with his cast just because they were already here would have done a disservice to the readership, I felt. The changes aren't done, either. With only four fulltime members, an "Old Order Changeth" issue would be tough, but I get your point. I'll try to make the changes as logical as possible, but I try to be open with the characters. Other writers have asked for certain people that are here (or who were scheduled to arrive) and I have tried to be as helpful as I can. If I think their plans are superior to mine, than chances are I'm going to let a character go. And when I took a look at the dib list and saw the people who I could get ... I just think they will provide for better stories from me. I prefer the Stern method of roster changes, as well, though, and I'd like to run as many past Avengers through the book as I can over my run.

2) Wonder Man - He's stuck like he is for awhile, but I think I've got some plans that should make it interesting.

3) Fun In the Sun - I plan on having the Whackos take advantage of their sunny location and heck, who doesn't want to write one of Hawkeye's Barbecues? <g> There'll be some interesting developments with

the LA locale after the team gets done with the **WORLD WITHOUT** storyline.

4) She-Hulk - She-Hulk is dibbed for a project by another writer and, truthfully, I've had my fill of writing Shulkie for the time being. Of course, if she were to become available ... <g>

5) My letter in WCA - You are correct, sir! WCA 14 it was and even though beezzer guessed it first, consider yourself No-Prized! Anyone have any guesses on where in the series beezzer's letter was?

Thanks for such a detailed letter, Matt. People seem to have high expectations for this title and I hope I can live up to them. When you look at the Marvel run of WCA, for my money the strength of the series wasn't the villains or the stories as much as it was the great character work Englehart did. (Post-Englehart there's not much I'm fond of ...) The work done with Hank Pym, the blossoming of Firebird, the "what makes an Avenger?" questions with Mockingbird ... these are the ties that I hope bind my work with the earlier series.

Also this month: **HAWKEYE # 13** by Lonni Holland ... More with Two-Gun Kid and the **OLD WEST SAGA** .

NEXT ISSUE: WEST COAST AVENGERS # 110 - WORLD WITHOUT, PARTS TWO & THREE

That's right! A double-sized issue featuring the West Coast Avengers heading into space to face off against Dr. Doom!!! Plus, what **THREE** people will be joining the Whackos? That's right, next issue will see three new Avengers signing up for duty including a member of Cap's Kooky Quartet, a former Chairman with a **NEW** name and someone who's never before been an Avenger!

-- Biscuit ... 1.February.1999

NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS

WEST COAST AVENGERS 110

***AVENGERS ASSEMBLE! - And there came a day ...
Hawkeye! Wonder Man! Tigra! US Agent! Cannonball?
Quicksilver? Falcon? These are the WEST COAST
AVENGERS!!!***

WEST COAST AVENGERS

110



MV1 - Northern Bear Productions

October, Year 3

WORLD WITHOUT

double-sized issue written by Mark Bousquet

Previously ... Visitors came to the Compound in the forms of Falcon and Quicksilver. Falcon came to bare his grievances with US Agent over the arrest of Councilman Proctor on cocaine possession charges. Quicksilver came to find out what Hawkeye wanted when he called him earlier at the place where he and his wife Crystal had been staying: leading the Knights of Wundagore from a castle on the Hudson

River. As tempers flared, the Compound was shaken when Beta Ray Bill fell from the sky and crashed onto the grounds. He whispered words to Hawkeye that made the Avenging Archer's blood run cold. Meanwhile, on a distant world, a billion billion voices chant ... DOOM! ... DOOM! ... DOOM! ...

PART TWO: EMPIRE

SCUTTLEBUTT - Present

" ... DOOM!!! ... DOOM!!! ... DOOM!!! ... DOOM!!! ... DOOM!!! ..."

"God ... I just don't believe it's possible ..."

Imagine that you stand on Beta Ray Bill's spaceship, Scuttlebutt, looking at a cosmic map of the far corner of the Shi'ar Empire. Twenty planets have been colored green.

They have been conquered by Dr. Doom.

Imagine that you were Hawkeye, Chairman of the Avengers west coast branch. Imagine that you dragged your growing and developing team half way across the cosmos to face your planet's most deadly villain. Imagine that their lives are on the line because of you.

"Let's do this, boss." The voice comes from behind you. It belongs to Wonder Man and you're glad to see, at least temporarily, he's not moping. You needn't turn around to know that there are eyes upon you, waiting for your command.

Imagine that you've come all this way because the alien warrior with the power of Thor, Beta Ray Bill, crashed into your Compound, exhausted, lucky to escape with his life.

Imagine that he told you the missing Dr. Doom - not seen on your world since you, and others, returned

from the Franklinverse, was, in fact, not lost at all. That he was out there, deep inside Shi'ar space.

And he was conquering *planets* .

Imagine that you're standing in the middle of space and only yesterday you were 140 years in the past playing cowboy, drinking sediment-filled beer and asking strange women to marry you.*

** See HAWKEYE 13 -- Sam Adams Mark ...*

Imagine that you now had to turn around and give a speech to people who followed you. Imagine that you may be sending them to their deaths.

"Fancy speeches are Cap's strength," you jest, but the words come out somber. "All I know is that Dr. Doom is running free out here and Beta Ray Bill thinks that if he conquers the next planet on his list, he could take control of the entire Shi'ar Empire. Doom's from Earth. We're from Earth. That makes this our mess to clean up. You've all got your orders. Any questions?"

No one did. Not strange considering who stayed behind in protest.

"Right then," you say, hesitating for one last second, "away we go on our separate paths. Good luck all."

Imagine that you were transported to the surface of a planet not your own, while the others were sent to other planets.

Imagine that you stand on the soil of a distant world and it looks ... just ... like ... Latveria!

How cold does your blood run?

You blink, but the image does not change. You see Latveria stuck in the middle of a desert. Winds howl by as sand kicks up into your eyes. You're here to

save someone that Bill has assured you is a necessity. You don't care if it's Woodgod you've come to save, you'll take all the help you can get.

To your left stands Beta Ray Bill and he is not well. His costume is ripped to shreds, he walks with a limp and the preliminary exam he received back at Avengers Compound indicates that he probably has three shattered ribs. Yet, still, he endures. Still, he walks. Still, he fights.

Just like an Avenger would.

AVENGERS COMPOUND - Earlier

"Damnit, where is everyone!?!"

Hawkeye pounded his fist onto the large computer inside the Compound that he was currently using to contact the East Coast Branch of the Avengers.

"I'm sorry, Master Hawkeye, but there's no one here," Jarvis, the long time butler of the Avengers answered. "The team is still quite shaken from their recent voyage into space." *

** See recent issues of AVENGERS 429 for the Spaceknight Saga -- ROM Fanboy Mark ...*

"This is crap, Jarvis!" Hawkeye stormed. "We've got a major crisis going on here! Why aren't people answering their communicards?"

"I do not know, Master Hawkeye," Jarvis frowned. "I can leave a message if you'd like."

"Sure," Hawkeye gritted through his clenched teeth. "Tell them if they don't hear from us in a week, we're probably all dead!"

Hawkeye slammed his fist hard onto the console, ending the transmission. No one was around - not the Fantastic Four, not the X-Men, not the Champions,

not the other half of the Avengers and those who did answer weren't going to be able to make it in time.

They needed to leave five hours ago.

SCUTTLEBUTT - Present

Imagine that you're a feline in human form.

You stand by a window and gaze into space. It all seems so big to you, so above your power to do anything.

You catch a glimpse of your image in the reflection of the glass and you find yourself feeling more than a bit foolish. Here you are, in the middle of the Shi'ar Empire, about to try to overthrow Dr. Doom and you're standing in a space ship wearing nothing more than a bikini. The fact that for once you're ashamed of something like this worries you more than Dr. Doom, but you've always been a bit egocentric.

Imagine that you were Greer Nelson, the Avenger known as Tigra, and you felt completely and totally incapable of doing anything that will be required of you.

Imagine that Hawkeye had just given the order to send you to a planet, entrusting you with a mission to stop 1,000 Doom-Bots.

Good thing you've been paired with a recently returned Avenger who's got more power than you've ever dreamed of.

But, you wonder, were you paired with her because you make a good team? Or because she's the most powerful person here ... and you're the weakest?

AVENGERS COMPOUND - The Back Lawn - Earlier

Quicksilver, Wonder Man, Falcon, US Agent, Cannonball, Tigra, Beta Ray Bill, Jolt and Shape talked in hushed tones by the pool, waiting for

Hawkeye to arrive. They said little, well aware of the grim task that was waiting for them on their trip to the stars.

None wanted to go, but they knew they must. Beta Ray Bill had fallen into their midst with a story that sent chills up and down their spines and they knew that it had just become Avengers business. All they required now was Hawkeye's presence and they could go.

Quicksilver had called back east to tell Crystal. They had only recently decided that Avengers membership was something they wanted to do again. * Pietro knew his wife didn't really want to come back, that she enjoyed life on the Hudson River living with the Knights of Wundagore, but she had agreed to come just for him. He was bored with that lifestyle, as he'd tire of this one eventually, too. It just wasn't in his nature to be stationary for too long.

** That happened in MARVEL TRIPLE ACTION 48 - On sale now at the Avengers Branch - It's a Quiet Issue Mark ...*

He made a mental not to do something especially nice for Crys when he came back.

A bright light suddenly lit up the nighttime sky just above them, but before any could make a move to a defensive position, the former Avenger known as Captain Marvel II and now known as Photon stood in their midst.

"I take it this isn't for one of Hawkeye's barbecues," she said dryly, looking at the grim faces before her.

"Afraid not, Photon," Quicksilver extended a hand.

"What's the latest?" she asked, exchanging greetings.

"The latest is we're just about set to leave," came Hawkeye's voice from the side as he walked up to her. "Glad you could join us, Photon," he managed to offer up an emotionless smile. "We could use your power."

"Done," she nodded. "It's about time I served as an Avenger again."

Hawkeye nodded, started to turn around and caught himself. "Photon, I'm only asking for this one mission."

"Oh," she said, surprised. "I - I thought, from your message you wanted me to come back full-time - I - I'm sorry. Of course, I'll help just for this mission."

Hawkeye smiled, again, but this time it was genuine. "You want to become an Avenger again?"

"I - Yes. I do," she admitted, though she wasn't about to tell them why. It didn't matter, she told herself, but she didn't buy it. She had another reason for being here, one not done completely for selfless reasons.

Hawkeye clasped her on the back. "Welcome to the West Coast Avengers, Photon."

"Doesn't the Charter require you to vote on this?" she asked, knowing full well it did. She had been an Avengers Chairman once. *

**** See the classic Roger Stern run on AVENGERS.***

Hawkeye threw up his hands in disgust. This wasn't the time for following procedure. This was the time for action. "Any objections?" Silence. "Didn't think so. All those in favor?" All the hands present went up.

"I should tell you, however, that I've dropped the Photon name," she informed. "It never really sat right with me."

"Gone back to calling yourself Captain Marvel?" Tigra asked, smiling as she welcomed Monica to the team.

"No, I'm sure Mar-Vell's boy is happier with the name than I was. It was never my chosen name, you know. The name 'Captain Marvel' was given to me by reporters. Truth is, I've never really considered my name to be a big deal. It's the actions, not the name you go by. I'm happy letting people call me what they will."

"Good thing. 'Cause when you did pick your name, you chose Photon ... and that name sucks," Agent cracked. "You should probably let people pick your name for you."

"I have," Monica answered, put off by Agent's tone. "I live in Louisiana and the locals in New Orleans have a name they call me. Between the Cajuns and the more anglicized locals they've given me a nickname that I might as well use. They call me Lady Merveille."

"Mer-VAY?" Cannonball asked. "That's French for 'marvel', isn't it?"

"It is," Monica smiled, shaking his hand and ignoring Agent's upturned nose. "The French had taken to calling me just Merveille - guess they hated the Photon name, too - but the local socialites thought that was too, well, too French, I guess, so they added the Lady part. Good for the local flavor, they told me, to have a Lady around." She shrugged. "Whatever. You must be Cannonball, correct?"

"That ah am," he smiled back, instantly liking the statuesque woman.

"As pleasant as this is," Beta Ray Bill cut in, holding his side in pain, "we've got planets to liberate."

THE PLANET AK'YEN'JA - Present

Imagine, for a second, that you were the long time Avenger known as Quicksilver.

You run across the surface of a planet that has been conquered by Dr. Doom, feeling a sadness for the people you pass, noting the blank look of defeat that is etched on their faces. Above you flies the Falcon.

You hate bullies like Dr. Doom. And Magneto. Ah, yes, the name that always sits on the edge of your mind. Magneto. Perhaps the most powerful mutant in the world who has used his power oftentimes to commit some of the most vile acts of atrocity you've ever seen.

He's your father.

His blood runs in your veins.

Imagine that to you the world moved as if it was in slow motion. Your mutant power is one of acceleration and you live in a body that moves five times faster than the rest of an entire planet. Think you might feel cranky watching everything roll by you in slow motion? Think you might feel ... a bit isolated from humanity?

That worries you because your father feels isolated from humanity, too. And you don't ever want to be like your father, do you?

To your right, a family cries together, huddled over what looks to be the dead body of a teen-aged girl.

You become instantly filled with righteous anger - just like your father would, you note to yourself - at any who could cause such conditions to develop.

Something people do not give you credit for is the love you have for those close to you. You love

passionately and completely ... even though you have a difficult time expressing it openly. You would die for your wife and daughter, and your sister, too.

Imagine that your life ran by in slow motion and you carried all those burdens inside you.

Imagine, for a second, that you were the long time Avenger known as Quicksilver. Would you really want to be him all day long?

THE LIGHTHOUSE - Earlier

"Holy! Commander, a large ship just entered Earth's orbit! It's massive!"

The "Commander" - it couldn't be soon enough before they stopped calling him that, he thought to himself - watched on as the skeleton crew that had been assembled here immediately set about putting the ship up on the large viewscreen in front of them.

It was massive.

"What is it?" he asked as techs furiously punched away at keyboards.

"There's nothing in the files stolen from SHIELD, STRIKE, the Avengers, X-Men, Fant-"

"Damnit," the Commander snapped, "don't you have them integrated in with the alien files our mysterious benefactor provided us with?"

"N-no sir, but I'm checking them now," the young tech, recently removed from his employ at Star City answered, punching keys as quickly as possible.

"Scanners! Anything hot on the ship?"

"No weapons, sir, from what we can tell-"

"Why does everyone around here have to guess about everything?!? We're here to protect this planet everyone! Start doing your jobs!"

"It's the Scuttlebutt, sir. It's the ship of Beta Ray Bill, origin: the Burning Galaxy."

"That's better," the Commander nodded. "We shouldn't have anything to worry about then. Keep scanning it every so often. We don't want it to know we're here. Our cloaking device is better than anything on Earth, but I'm not sure if it's capable of staying hidden from the Scuttlebutt. Let's not risk it."

"Sir, flare up in the northern United States!" shouted a Japanese tech suddenly. "Preliminary scans indicate it's a mutant power ... previously unrecognized ... the heat it's putting off is unbearable ... "

Another tech was already zooming in for a close-up, giving the Lighthouse crew a view of a burning factory in Iowa.

"Check the power against that of the Human Torches I and II, Pyro, Firebird, Firestar, Firelord and Pyron," the Commander ordered. "I want to know if it's similar to any known entity."

"Pyron, sir?" an American tech asked. "Who's that?"

"I see you've been neglecting your research, Scanner Drayton," the Commander accused. "Pyron the Thermal Man first battled the Avengers." *

**** AVENGERS 206 - Back Issue Biscuit ...***

"Negative on any matches, sir, this appears to be lava based."

"Check references against Magma, Molten Man, the Lava Men ..."

Back at AVENGERS COMPOUND ...

"Right," Hawkeye answered, resetting his focus. "Bill has informed me that his ship, the Scuttlebutt, has arrived in Earth orbit. We'll take one of the

modified Quinjets up to it and Scuttlebutt can take us where we need to go. The ship has teleporting powers, but I want a Quinjet inside it just to be safe. Before we leave, though, I need to ask something. Cannonball, Quicksilver, Falcon are you taking this trip as members of the team, or just to help out?"

"As an Avenger," Quicksilver answered quickly. "I've spoken at great length to Crystal about this and we'd like to come back to the team, though she prefers, because of our daughter Luna, to stay as a reserve."

*

* The aforementioned MARVEL TRIPLE ACTION # 48
- Writing All Over the Place Mark ...

Hawkeye nodded. "Glad to have you back. Two of the Kooky Quartet is my kinda team. Sam?"

"I can't recommit to the team at this time as anything more than a reserve. I'm here long enough to clear my friend and that's it. But I'm going with you. An Avenger would do no less."

"Cannonball?"

"Avenger." Cannonball felt pride swell up inside him just saying the word.

Hawkeye smiled despite the situation. "Well, this team is rounding into shape nicely."

"I guess this means there's no room for me," Jolt added sarcastically. "So I get to make the trip as a guest of some kind. Thanks."

"Now's not the time, Jolt," Hawkeye added sharply. "And you're not coming. No. Don't start. You're staying here, with Shape. Someone's got to watch the monitors. The rest of us can handle this."

"Don't include me. I'm not going."

"What?" Hawkeye and the rest spun to look hard at US Agent, his admission even silencing Jolt. "What do you mean? This is an order, Agent!"

"I've got to stay here and continue to investigate the drug trade that Councilman Proctor is involved in. It's bigger than we thought."

Falcon was about to say something, but Hawkeye raised a hand, stopping him. "Agent, this is an order. This is Avengers business. You've caused enough trouble pulling the team into that mess with the politician. I'm ordering you to come with us."

"Look, big shot," Agent leveled a finger at the Avengers Chairman, "give me one reason why we should head off into space and take on Dr. Doom? We've got plenty of problems around here to deal with. Let Doom fight with the Shi'ar. It beats him being on Earth, trying to take *this* planet over."

Hawkeye seethed. No way Agent would reject an order if this was Captain America giving it to him. It was the same old story, as far as Clint was concerned, no respect for the West Coast Avengers.

No respect for Hawkeye.

THE PLANET MIL'GROMAL - Present

Imagine that you were Simon Williams, the long time Avenger known as Wonder Man.

You've been going through tough times these past few weeks as you try to cope with the fact that the woman you love, Wanda Maximoff the Scarlet Witch, sister of your teammate Quicksilver, doesn't love you.

She has, in fact, chose to be alone rather than be with you.

Imagine that you find yourself god knows how many light years from her, ready to enter into a war with Dr. Doom.

You lay face down in the mud, trying to be as still as you can. Somewhere to your right lies Cannonball. Doombots walk everywhere. This planet you find yourself on is a mess, the most recently conquered planet by Doom. Destruction is everywhere. There is more rubble than houses left standing.

Of course, there are more Wonder Mans on the planet than houses because Doom leveled every last standing structure.

Doom is building warships with this planet's factories. You and Sam Guthrie have been entrusted to stop them from being made.

Imagine that despite all this, you smile. Despite the grimness, this is what Avengers do. And it feels oh so good to get your mind off Wanda for awhile and be an Avenger again, doesn't it?

AVENGERS COMPOUND - Earlier

As Hawkeye stormed after Agent towards the main house, Sam Guthrie (Cannonball) and Greer Nelson (Tigra) stood together, talking in hushed tones. In little more than a day, they had grown comfortable with each other. It wasn't surprising, Sam thought. Hawkeye hadn't been around much, US Agent mostly acted like a big shot jerk and Wonder Man had all but locked himself in his room, pining over the Scarlet Witch.

"Nervous, kid?" Tigra asked.

Cannonball let out a deep breath. "Not nervous, no. But I am aware of what lay ahead." He stood silently for a moment, before realizing that Tigra probably

hadn't asked because she was worried about him. "You?" he asked her in return. "How are you feeling?"

Tigra wrapped her arms a little tighter around herself, shivering though she wasn't cold. "Fine, I guess." Pause. "These big epics make me a little nervous," she admitted in a voice that was barely above a whisper. "Look at me, I'm a cat. I've no real superpowers but my agility."

"What do you mean? You've got heightened senses, too. And the tail, of course," Sam smiled at her.

Tigra smiled back, appreciative. "Yeah," she waved the tail around a bit, making sure to rub it across Cannonball's legs, "well, that does make me pretty special, I guess."

Lady Merveille looked around and shook her head. This wasn't going to be easy, no matter who the foe they were to face, let alone Dr. Doom. Cannonball was new to the team and, as such, hadn't worked with anyone yet. It's one thing to know someone and like them, but you have to fight alongside them to get to know how they move in battle. Otherwise, people get hurt. Seriously hurt.

And few of the folks here had done much fighting alongside each other.

"Damnit!" Hawkeye stormed as he approached. "He won't come! We're calling everyone, needing all the people we can get and now members of our own team are refusing to go!" Hawkeye looked around and took stock of the people gathered in front of him. "Screw it. Let's go. What have we got to lose?"

Against Dr. Doom? He'd take his chances. Against a Dr. Doom that had conquered twenty planets and crippled a guy that was almost an equal to Thor?

The odds were impossible.

He smiled. "Avengers. Let's do it."

At that moment inside the LA COUNTY JAIL ...

Councilman Michael Proctor sits in a cell alone and bangs his head against the wall. He had called his good friend Sam Wilson to come to LA to help him out of this jam the Avengers had put him in. Sam wasn't just a friend, he was the Falcon and a former Avenger. *

**** See WEST COAST AVENGERS 108 and CAPTAIN AMERICA 483 - Middle of the Night Mark ...***

The Councilman was hoping that Sam could use some pull and get him out of here, but so far nothing had happened.

All he could do was sit and wait.

There was another part of the jail where Michael preferred to be - the area where prisoners were discharged after having their bail posted.

While the Councilman's bail was set at one million dollars, another in the jail had his bail set low enough to provide an easy freedom. His name was Slyde, a super-villain that the Avengers had sent to jail.*

**** WEST COAST AVENGERS 107 - Slip Slydin' Away Mark ...***

Inexplicably to anyone who saw Slyde while he was incarcerated, he was allowed to remain in costume for the entire time he was in jail.

"Don't know why anyone would want to bail out someone like you, Slyde," the guard grumbled as he removed the handcuffs from Slyde's wrists. Handcuffs that Slyde could have slipped out of at any time thanks to his superslick grey costume if he had wanted to.

He didn't. The person who he had called with his one phone call had specifically told him to go along with whatever the cops and guards asked of him and that he'd be bailed out within five days. They didn't want it to look like they'd rush in and bail anyone out at the drop of a hat. They didn't want other criminals in their group unless they were committed to the movement for the movement's sake and not just to have someone to bail them out of jail.

Slyde looked at the guard as the man placed the handcuffs on the counter. "We all have friends," Slyde said solemnly. He turned to the woman who had bailed him out, "Brother, give the man a card. Perhaps he could use some direction in his life."

The attractive woman in her late forties already had a card out. She handed it to the guard and turned to walk away with Slyde.

The guard scratched his head as he looked at the plain white business card in his hand. It read,

THE ENLIGHTENMENT FOUNDATION

Prepare for the End

SCUTTLEBUTT - Earlier

The Avengers - Hawkeye, Wonder Man, Tigra, Cannonball, Falcon, Lady Merveille and Quicksilver - stood and listened to Beta Ray Bill. "Doom's first conquered planet was a small sphere called Ak'yen'ja. He took it down single-handedly with equal parts manipulation and power.* From information provided by the Starjammers, Ak'yen'ja's technology is barely equal to that of the United States in the 1930's. Doom took over and the first thing he did was force the various peoples to build factories and machines. They built a spaceship, which Doom used to journey to the nearest planet.

**** See FANTASTIC FOUR 433 for Doom's first planetary conquest - In A Galaxy Far Far Away Mark ...***

"Which he then conquered. This planet was more technologically advanced, so Doom moved his base of operations there. He made a bigger ship. And on he went, conquering planets and turning their factories into war machines. He's building an army of Doombots and a fleet of spaceships. He's building laser guns, computers ... he's building nuclear bombs.

"Citizens are being enslaved and cultures are being eradicated. Every building he comes across, he destroys and in it's place he forces people to build a new structure using Latverian architecture. Every planet has built or is building a Castle Doom so he can lead his troops from anywhere.

"People join with him or they become slaves of the state."

Beta Ray Bill paused. "Avengers, listen well to my words because what I am about to tell you is perhaps the most dangerous weapon Doom has on his side and, quite possibly, is the one weapon we can not defeat.

"To many of the people on these planets, he is not Doom the Conqueror. He is Doom the Liberator. The man who cast off the Shi'ar Empire from their worlds.

"The majority of people we shall meet can not grasp the devil they worship.

"The next planet in his path, Hollandinia, is the largest one he has yet to attempt to conquer. It's the tenth most advanced planet in the entire Shi'ar Empire. It's tenth only because it builds one thing and one thing only: Shi'ar War Cruisers. Everybody

who lives on the planet either builds these crafts or is enrolled in a State Center, being trained for the Shi'ar military.

"Do you want to know the genius of Doom?

"Hollandinia's State Center pulls in recruits from the middle systems. These aren't the tight circle of planets fiercely loyal to the Shi'ar, nor the outer planets that barely feel the Shi'ar presence. No, these recruits are from the middle systems - the planets who pay the most taxes and see the fewest returns. The planets with citizens the least happy about the Empire they are forced to be a part of. Planets, in part, that Doom has already conquered.

"If Doom conquers this planet, he gains sixty, maybe sixty-five Shi'ar spacecrafts and a factory to produce them. But more ... Doom gains a Shi'ar trained army.

"If he wins this planet, with his brilliant strategical mind, there is every chance that Doom can rise up and take control of the entire Shi'ar Empire. All of it. Do you want to live in a universe where Doom controls the largest intergalactic Empire?

"Every day at a pre-determined time, every loyal person on every planet inside Doom's Empire gathers in town squares and chants the name DOOM over and over again.

"Close you eyes, Avengers.

"Can you hear it?

"A billion billion voices chanting the name of their god."

" ... DOOM!!! ... DOOM!!! ... DOOM!!! ... DOOM!!! ... DOOM!!! ..."

PART THREE: GRIP

THE SPACECRAFT LATVERIA VIII

The illusion of victory is an easy trap for those who seek to conquer. They plan for so long, anticipate so strongly, that when that slaved over plan is accomplished they often allow themselves to feel the rush of what they have so long sought.

Victor Von Doom has done many things in his lifetime and even he, as great a man as he is, has let himself grow comfortable in victories that were not yet truly won.

No longer. No, as Doom made his way across the Shi'ar Empire, conquering planet after planet, he realized that until you lifted your boot from the Earth and saw the crushed remains of your foe, you had not truly won.

It was a mistake he would never make again.

Doom did not arrive on a planet, defeat it and then leave, content with the knowledge that he had beat the best that planet had to offer.

No, Dr. Doom was not so foolish.

He now treated victories like he treated Latveria. Not something to be put on a shelf in a jar, or to be left lingering in the mind like a satisfying lover, but to be controlled.

Victory could not bring apathy.

It brought an even greater commitment.

Doom made sure that every planet on whose surface he set foot could not ever think of him as a bad memory because he'd never leave. Every planet that came under the heel of Doom was leveled to the ground and rebuilt like Latveria. Every nation that was rebuilt like Latveria held a Castle Doom. Every city inside that nation was ruled over by a Doombot.

Their word was his word and his word was law.

Victor stood looking out at space from a viewing deck on board the Latveria VIII. He felt more alive than he had since he blew the Baxter Building into space. He wasn't just winning random battles - he was devising plans and fulfilling them. He was creating, building things that even Reed Richards was not doing.

Ah, if only Richards could see him now. If only Richards could see the triumph of Doom.

But Richards would know soon enough.

Doom knew, out here in the middle of space, there wasn't a soul alive who could conceive a plan that could stop him.

SCUTTLEBUTT - Earlier

Beta Ray Bill finished his speech and stepped back. Hawkeye let the words sink in for a moment before stepping forward and addressing his team.

"Here's what we're going to do," Hawkeye commanded, filling his mind with visions of George C. Scott to help him stay strong, "Quicksilver and Falcon will journey to Ak'yen'ja. That's the first planet Doom conquered. I want to know everything we can about what happened there. According to reports provided by the Starjammers, Doom wasn't himself while there. He had some kind of amnesia following his return from the Franklinverse. I want to know everything."*

**** Someone should tell Hawkeye to read FANTASTIC FOUR 421 to 425 for Doom's first days back from the Franklinverse - Doctor Mark ...***

"You can't be serious," Quicksilver cut in. "I did not return to the Avengers to play messenger boy in the

midst of a cosmic war."

Hawkeye looked at Pietro hard - he thought the fiery speedster might not like this. "Pietro, we need to know all we can about Doom. You're the most experienced Avenger here, and, as such, have the most knowledge about Doom. You're-"

"Fine," Pietro brushed Hawkeye's explanation aside with the wave of his hand. "It's **your team, Hawkeye. I will do as told. But do not expect me to be slowed down waiting for the Falcon to keep up with me."**

"Just a minute!" Falcon snapped. Sam was trying to calm down from the incident with US Agent, but he just couldn't.* Agent was a complete jerk, as far as Sam was concerned and what he did was inexcusable. Especially given the fact that while Sam had chosen to let his friend rot away in a Los Angeles county jail to travel all the way to the Shi'ar Galaxy to stop Doom, Agent had stayed behind to gather more evidence against Councilman Proctor.

**** Last Issue - Cain and Abel Mark ...***

"We're not going to do this!" Hawkeye barked, silencing both Sam and Pietro. "Work together. You're Avengers, damnit."

Hawkeye was answered in exactly the manner he wanted to be answered, with silence. But that didn't stop the burn that raged inside Quicksilver. He felt that where he was going offered little or no chance to face off against Doom.

"Next," he continued, his voice on edge, "Wonder Man and Cannonball will go to the planet Mil'gromal. Doom's building warships there. These are the ships that are making up the bulk of his fleet. I want production on these ships stopped."

"You got it," Wonder Man grinned despite himself, causing those that had been present at the Compound over the past few days to look at him quizzically. But there was something about all this that made him feel more alive than he had been in a long while. "Nothing I want more right now than to cut loose."

"How are we going to stop warships, Hawkeye?" Cannonball asked. "Is there a plan or is simply a "make a mess of things" mission?"

"I like the way you think," Hawkeye grinned back. "You and Simon are to go in and hammer everything you come across. Break everything you can and leave before they hand you a bill. I don't think even Stark can afford to pay for Shi'ar warships."

"Lady Merveille. Tigra. On the planer Chambeezer is the principle Doombot factory. Like Simon and Cannonball, you're job is to hit it hard and take out as many Doombots as you can. Intel reports that Bill has provided are sketchy at best, so we don't know if Doom is making full-blown Doombots or lesser models that are being used mainly to intimidate by their presence. It's possible Doom doesn't want to risk his genius falling into hands that aren't loyal to him, so the weaker Doombots are a possibility. But don't count on it."

"The latest word," Beta Ray Bill interjected, "is that there's 1,000 Doombots ready to be shipped out. Your first concern is eliminating the Doombots already completed."

"There's no possibility that Doom has put live people inside those suits?" Monica Rambeau asked.

"Nothing we have indicates that he has done that," Bill answered, finding Monica's gaze to be subtly

powerful and commanding.

Off to the side, Tigra wondered just what she could hope to accomplish besides watching Lady Merveille in action. When it was just her, Clint, Jack and Simon on the team, she felt pretty good about herself. But now ... Quicksilver, Lady Merveille, Cannonball ... hanging out with the likes of Beta Ray Bill ... Greer found herself wondering if Avengers membership on the West Coast was suddenly becoming a place where she would be little more than useless. She didn't like the large group at all, it was too likely that she wouldn't be the center of attention.

"Hawkeye, I don't know if I can-"

"You can, Tigra!" Hawkeye snapped. "There's no other choice. Find a way to do it. The last thing we need right now is somebody whining about what they can't do! You're an Avenger. Act like it."

Hawkeye turned around to have a moment to himself. One last chance to look at the charts and go over the plan in his mind.

"Let's do this, boss." The voice comes from behind him.. It belongs to Wonder Man and Hawkeye's glad to see, at least temporarily, that Simon isn't moping. Clint could feel the eyes of the Avengers on him, and he turned around slowly.

"Fancy speeches are Cap's strength," he jested, but the words come out somber. "All I know is that Dr. Doom is running free out here and Beta Ray Bill thinks that if he conquers the next planet on his list, he could take control of the entire Shi'ar Empire. Doom's from Earth. We're from Earth. That makes this our mess to clean up. You've all got your orders. Any questions?"

No one did. Not strange considering Agent wasn't with them.

"Right then," Hawkeye breathed, hesitating for one last second, "away we go on our separate paths. Good luck all."

THE PLANET AK'YEN'JA - Present

Quicksilver and Falcon stood alongside a kindly woman, looking at a young man who would be King. His name was Tytan and he stood in the center of the desert, stripped naked, save for the chain strapped to his left ankle. He was a battered and broken man, but his punishment was not at an end. The citizens of Ak'yen'ja would forever hold him as guilty in their hearts for he was the first to side with Victor Von Doom.

"He's chained to a gravestone," Falcon muttered, noting the name and inscription that was chiseled onto the limestone:

El'kana: The Heart of Ak'yen'ja is Her Soul

"Who was she?" Pietro asked Tytan.

"A ... a hero," Tytan answered. "Victor ... killed her and then he ... he took our planet."*

** FANTASTIC FOUR # 433 - Fond Remembrances Mark ...*

"Are you responsible for her death?" Pietro asked, barely able to hold the contempt from his voice. He had learned little from the people who had brought him and Sam to this place, but he had learned this.

"There are those who blame him for everything," came the soft, older voice of Ja'lana, leader of the Ba'na'ay, one of the six races that inhabit the planet Ak'yen'ja.

"I fought with you at the end!" Tytan screamed like a child.

"You did and it is for that reason alone that you live," Ja'lana answered softly, though the ice in her tone was unmistakable. "Come, strangers, you will be given an audience with Chieftain Ioeya of the Eaau. He leads us now. At least," her voice dropped even lower, "he is who we all turn to for advice. Victor is our true leader."

She turned to go, but Falcon and Quicksilver hesitated.

"Is it necessary to torture him like this?" Falcon asked Ja'lana, eyeing a group of children who approached with sticks and insults.

"It is," she answered without turning. "But do not feel sorry for 'King' Tytan. He is only King because Victor killed his father."

"And?" the Falcon asked, puzzled.

"Tytan was Victor's ally. He stood by and watched his father murdered, doing nothing to stop the atrocity." *

**** FANTASTIC FOUR # 430 - Long Live The King Mark***

...

"I didn't know!" Tytan wailed.

Quicksilver and Falcon eyed each other, then Tytan, then the approaching children and then each other once again. Before the children took another step they were removed of their sticks.

"There are better ways," was all Quicksilver would say.

THE PLANET MIL'GROMAL - Present

Wonder Man and Cannonball stood behind a decrepit building, hiding from the Doombot patrol

guards. Since landing on Mil'gromal, they hadn't said a word to each other - the sight before them was almost too much to bear.

The were looking at an entire society transformed against it's will. On the surface, a cultural architecture style was being erased from existence and replaced with Latverian design and below the surface ... by the downtrodden looks on the faces of the Mil'gromalans they had seen, it was much more than just the look of their building that was being subjugated.

Mil'gromalan architecture, from what they could tell, was beautiful - it contained the columns of Greek architecture, topped with what looked like Chinese rooftops. The entire setting was done in bright colors: reds, pinks, electric blues ... Simon thought it must have looked like a giant neon sign from above before Doom had had it leveled.

Construction crews - the slave labor that Doom had forced his opposers into - were busy cleaning up the massive rubble and replacing it with building that would fit right in at Latveria.

For Simon Williams and Sam Guthrie, the sight was hard to look at. Back on Earth, Latveria was but a small country, but this ...

"Is that what he'd do if he ever took over Earth?" Sam asked, thinking of his family back home in Kentucky.

"I don't know," Simon answered quietly. "But if we weren't already certain we were doing the right thing ..." he let the words trail off as a young child wailed helplessly at a Doombot not thirty feet away. Simon had to grab hold of Sam's arm to keep him from going to help. They couldn't be discovered this early

and the Doombot wasn't hurting the child. It was just standing there taking the brunt of the attack.

In the distance, they saw what they had come here for: a large series of factories, stretching as far as the eye could see into the horizon, doing nothing save turning out warships.

"Ah can't believe US Agent stayed at home," Sam shook his head. "How could he?"

Simon looked at the young mutant seriously, choosing his words carefully before continuing. "Agent didn't know what we'd find out here - not that he should have to come along, but still I'd like to think that if he could see this, he'd do whatever he could to get here and help out."

EARTH - AVENGERS COMPOUND

Jack Walker sat in the Communications Center of the Compound performing the most tedious of all tasks demanded of an Avenger: monitor duty.

He had his US Agent costume on, but his mask and gloves off. His feet were up and he passed the time by munching on a tuna-fish salad sub. Unlike most other Avengers, Jack probably took the most joy out of monitor duty. He liked being at the center of a crisis and being the one who made decisions in the heat of battle.

He wouldn't mind being the guy making the decisions for this entire outfit, but he wasn't looking to take Clint's job.

Not that he'd refuse the position, either.

God knows he'd have handled this Beta Ray Bill thing differently. What was Hawkeye thinking, sending an untested group of heroes out into the deep reaches of space to battle a maniac like Dr.

Doom? What was he hoping to accomplish? Stop him and bring him back to lock away in the Vault?

Please.

Hawkeye let his emotions get the better of him - not that this would be the first or last time that would happen. He saw the battered Beta Ray Bill and heard the horror story about what Dr. Doom had been doing since he returned from that Onslaught/Franklin Richards world and thought about all those poor people being oppressed on those planets and took off like he was Clint Eastwood.

Did he think he was a cowboy or something?

It didn't make sense. They had plenty of problems here to deal with, not the least of which was the hodgepodge line-up that Clint had thrown together. In the span of about thirty seconds, he had added Cannonball, Quicksilver and Lady Photon or whatever she called herself to the team and it looked like Falcon was going to stick around, too.

Hawk had gotten stars in his eyes, just like he had apparently done way back during the early days of the WCA with the Thing. *

**** Back during the first year or so of WEST COAST AVENGERS - Ever Lovin' Blue Eyed Mark ...***

Clint saw the power and prestige of ... Lady Merveille? What the hell kind of stupid name was that? - and Quicksilver and got all excited, thinking about the mission at hand and not the mission beyond that. Adding Merveille made no sense - they had Living Lightning on as a reserve member and his powers were similar to the ex-Photon.

Never mind, too, that adding Quicksilver meant that that hussy Crystal would be hanging around - with a kid, no less - which gave the team Living

Lightning, Shape, Jolt and Crystal hanging around in the background for a rapidly growing team.

Agent smiled thinking of Jolt. That kid had a fire inside her that Agent liked to see. She's was going to be all right, and not just because she'd be a pain in Hawkeye's neck for as long as she was here.

FZZZZZZZAT!

"What the-?!?" Agent fell backwards, tipping his chair over. He had recovered before the chair hit the floor and rolled back onto his feet. "Lightning! What do you think you're doing?!?"

"I got here as fast as I could, Agent," Miguel Santos said hurriedly. "I was in the middle of a test when Hawkeye's emergency message came through. If I had left, I would've failed the course and I need it for-"

"Don't sweat it, kid," Agent assured him.

"But it sounded urgent!"

"For Hawkeye, it was," Agent shrugged. "Me, I wouldn't have gone half way across the galaxy looking for trouble. Want half of my tuna sub?" he asked, offering Miguel his meal.

"Uh ..." Miguel tried hard to register the two sides of the situation. Hawkeye put out the Call for all Avengers to assemble, yet here Agent sat eating dinner like nothing was wrong. What was going on? He needed help. "So ... uh ... where's Jolt?"

THE PLANET CHAMBEEZER

**CLANK! CLANK! CLANK! CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!
CLANK! CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!**

The rhythmic stomping of metal boots on brick walkways was driving Tigra insane.

"God, don't they ever stop?" she asked Monica.

Lady Merveille said nothing for a moment, lost in watching what she counted as 250 Doombots marching in tight formation. "I wonder what would happen if one of the malfunctioned, somehow?"

"Huh?" Tigra asked. "Who knows? Who cares? I mean, we've got to destroy all of them, right? How are we supposed to do that? You can do it all by yourself. What am I supposed to do, sit here and lick myself?"

Monica eyed Tigra carefully as the furry woman kicked idly at the grass covered hill they stood on with her clawed feet. Tigra was part cat, which meant she didn't think like any other human. There was a balancing act that went on inside her head between the human side and the feline side of her personality. She'd heard stories from the other Avengers back during her days as Chairman that Tigra had been ... rather promiscuous with the male members of the team in the past, a product of her feline need for constant attention. It looked to Monica that something similar was going on now. It was as if she was a cat feeling put out by its owner buying a dog that it lavished all its attention on. With the new members of the team added to a group that had spent a long time together in the past, Monica thought it may be possible that Tigra was depressed at the lack of focus being given to her.

Monica thought that made sense. 'Tigra's been through many of these self-esteem crises. Perhaps this is why. She craves attention and when she doesn't get it, she falls in on herself.'

"Tigra, *Greer*, we're going to need you to complete this mission," Lady Merveille said quietly. "If those Doombots are anything like the Doombots back home, there's a good chance that I won't be able to

do anything against them. They're probably built with electrical surge protectors, so I can't just go overload them. We're going to have to use strategy and stealth to defeat these Doombots - raw power isn't going to do us much good at all."

Tigra picked up her head and smiled politely. She figured Merveille was just saying this to be polite, but it felt good nonetheless. "Thanks, Phoebe, Merveille," she grinned politely. "Sorry."

"It happens," Monica smiled back.

"So what do you suggest?" Tigra asked hopefully.

"I don't know," Merveille answered honestly, "but I do wish I knew where the other 750 Doombots were."

THE PLANET THOMAS X2

"Say something, Hawkeye."

You stood looking around at a nightmare gone bad. The wind blowing sand into your eyes and ears barely registers, but you find yourself remembering what it was like to watch television in the days before cable. You'd sit with the other carney folks, watching some black and white twelve inch set you managed to scrape up from a junkyard somewhere, fooling with the antenna wires for hours just to be able to watch a little Cubs baseball without all that snow distorting the view.

But, except for the color, what you looked at now reminded you of those times.

Sand whipped by in front of you, circling back, dodging away from you, hurtling towards you, and standing in the background, like Wrigley Field trying to shine through the television snow, stood Latveria.

You'd come all this way to find a place that shouldn't be.

"Hawkeye, are you well?"

"Huh?" Hawkeye was knocked back. "Yeah, just had enough of sand and deserts is all. Can't believe in the last few days I've been sent back in time* and now sent halfway across the universe and both times I end up in a desert." He shook his head, "Where do we have to go from here?"

**** The OLD WEST SAGA starting In HAWKEYE # 12 - Kid Mark ...***

"West about five blocks in where they keep the prisoners, according to the intel reports we picked up from the Starjammers!" Beta Ray Bill answered, shouting above the wind.

"Their info good?"

"I don't think they'd pass along this info unless they were absolutely certain! They know how important it is to stop Doom!"

"Let's get to it, then," Hawkeye answered, starting off west. They had to keep close together to hear each other talk. The houses they passed were all boarded up. "Coulda picked a better time!" Hawkeye shouted behind him at Beta Ray Bill.

"This *was* the best time!" Bill answered, shouting above the roar of the wind. "All this sand means everyone is inside so we shouldn't be spotted! The Doombot patrol guards won't come out in this - the sand messes up their internal gears!"

"Never mind my internal gears," Hawkeye grumbled to himself.

It looked like a ghost town to Hawkeye, but after five grueling minutes they had reached what was obviously the jail. It was the only building with bars

on the windows. "Comforting," he mused, "to see that bars on windows is a universal concept."

"What do we do now?" he asked Bill.

"We hit it," Bill answered. "Hard."

"Gotcha!" Hawk shouted, reaching into his quiver of arrows, searching for the correct notch that would indicate the arrow he needed.

"I'll handle this one!" Bill answered and ran across the street to the jail, Hawkeye on his heels.

Beta Ray Bill stood in front of the door, pausing for a second as he idly grabbed his side. 'Guys gotta get medical attention,' Clint mused.

"Get ready!" Bill shouted and then yanked open the front door. The open door sucked the howling winds through and Clint found himself jerked forward off-balance. He rolled with the wind, noting that there were five guards in the small room, landing on the floor and then rolling up to his feet, arrow already notched onto his bow.

Bola arrow took out the guard to the left before he was standing fully erect.

Putty arrow snagged the arm of the guard standing next to a weapon's rack before his costume had resettled itself.

Net arrow ensnared the three guards furthest away from him before Bill had the door shut.

Hawkeye looked around to check out the room more closely. There was only one cell and it held only one prisoner.

Hawkeye shook his head. "Is that a white sea horse with hands standing upright or was I snorting more that sand outside in that storm?"

"Hawkeye," Beta Ray Bill explained, "let me introduce you to Lord Kofi Whitemane."

WORLD WITHOUT to be continued ...

WEST COAST LINES

send comments to mariner2@tiac.net

First off, why the double-sized issue? Basically, what it came down to is that I write faster than Lonni does and to keep the two series on similar publishing schedules, I figured I'd double this issue up.

Second. LADY MERVEILLE? Two people deserve some of the credit for this name. Lonni was the first to suggest something French, basing it off Monica's heritage and her residence down in Louisiana, and Scott Harris was the one who informed me that Marvel in French was "Merveille". My contribution was adding the "Lady" out front. Monica deserves a "regal-ish" name I felt, something in the tradition of "Captain Marvel", so I stuck the "Lady" out front to add a little more oomph to the name. I could have gone with just Lady Marvel, but that was too similar to Captain Marvel - not too mention that it's kinda plain. And check out Amazing Spider-Man Annual 16. The first name given to her by onlookers that the press picked up is actually Spanish, so the foreign language based name is keeping with her first adventure. Let me know what you think of the name change.

Third. The roster. As I said, there were folks that beezers was going to use that I wasn't really sure of, so in the end, I traded Swordsman, Magdalene and Variable for Quicksilver, Crystal, Falcon, Bova and Lady Merveille. All things considered, I like what I have. I like the idea of a big roster, too - so long as no one ends up just being there with nothing going on.

And the roster isn't completely set yet, either, but then again, I don't think this roster ever will be completely set.

From the Hornet:

All right. Cannonball in the team is a brilliant move., Please make him an official member. I love the guy and it would be great to see two favorites, Wondy and Sam, in the same team.

great work.

Thanks, Hornet! As you can tell from this issue, you've gotten your wish, Sam Guthrie is officially an Avenger! And Sam and Wondy are even teaming up in this story-arc.

From Ralph Angelo on the mv1talk list:

West coast Avengers 107 & 108

I finally got around to checking out Mark Bousquet's premiere on the WCA, and I have to say I was pleasantly pleased. His first two issues were solid Superhero fare. I like the inclusion of Cannonball on the team very much, though I was hoping we could've seen the new kid in town, "Variable", stick around as well. But, I have no real complaints at all here. I like what I see so far, and feel the team is in good hands. The issues left us with some questions about what's going on here, but I think it's a good ride to be on at this point. I don't know what Marks going to do withg "Shape", but I have a feeling he'll be there for more then just comic relief. we have US Agent for that! But seriously, I have a feeling we'll be seeing Quicksilver turn up soon, as well as a few others, so this should be a good fun run.

Your feeling proved correct, Ralph! Quicksilver is officially a full-time Avenger again and Crystal and Luna (and Bova) are on the way. As for Variable, he isn't gone completely from the MV1 scene and when

he's set to show up again, I'll be sure to let folks know. I like the idea of a writer of AVENGERS adding a brand new character to the team, and rest assured I'll be doing that at some point if I get a chance. Thanks for the kind words, Ralph!

A Review from Matt Turnage:

Avengers West Coast #108 - We certainly get a few interesting subplots from Mark here - particularly the one involving US Agent. I suppose he was tipped off by the Commission... I'm really wondering if he's on his way out. I hope not, as I think he brings something interesting to any group dynamic. I'm very glad to see that the Falcon's coming aboard, at least temporarily (although I hope permanently). Mark's going to turn this into a very solid lineup, I suspect. But the sooner Wonder Man quits his moping, the better.

Also This Month: HAWKEYE # 14 by Lonni Holland! - The Old West Saga continues! Is Hawkeye getting married?!?

NEXT ISSUE: WEST COAST AVENGERS # 111 - WORLD WITHOUT continues ... The Avengers make their first play against Doom's forces! Hawkeye and Beta Ray Bill set a trap for Doctor Doom! Why was rescuing Kofi so important? Doom discovers the Avengers meddling! An Avenger loses a hand! (But doesn't gain a hook, don't worry!) All this and a cast member leaves as Crystal, Luna and Bova arrive!

-- Mark ... 6.March.1999

WEST COAST AVENGERS 111

NOV. YEAR 3 MV1 Presents ... Earth's Mightiest Heroes!!! AVENGERS



And there came a day ... a day when the foes became too great for even Earth's Mightiest Heroes to handle alone!

On that day was born ... the West Coast Avengers!

111 NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS # 111

Hawkeye! Wonder Man! Tigra! USAgent! Cannonball! Quicksilver! Falcon! Lady Merveille!

WORLD WITHOUT

written by Mark Bousquet

Previously ... Beta Ray Bill crashed onto the grounds of the Avengers Compound with the tale of Dr. Doom conquering planets inside the Shi'ar Empire. Horrified at Doom's actions, Hawkeye ordered the Avengers into space. Not all the Avengers shared his enthusiasm and concern and USAgent stayed behind to further the drug

investigation that led to the arrest of Councilman Michael Proctor, a friend of the high-flying Falcon's! Returning to active duty just in time for the journey to the stars were Quicksilver and Monica Rambeau, the newly named Lady Merveille! Hawkeye and Beta Ray Bill split the Avengers into teams to carry out different missions on worlds under Doom's control. Hawkeye and Bill rescued Lord Kofi Whitemane from a jail on one of Doom's planets.

PART FOUR: CHAINS, ONCE LOOSE

INSIDE SHI'AR SPACE

Admiral Phyken had heard the reports and scoffed at them.

Some maverick was "conquering" planets that belonged to the Shi'ar, readying for an assault on Hollandinia of all planets. Like there'd be anyone foolish enough to even attempt such a thing.

Despite his certainty that there was nothing serious going on - even if there was someone "conquering" planets, it was only because the Shi'ar only cared about these planets at tax time. As soon as they sent a single starship back to them, they'd cave like the dogs they were.

"Lieutenant, report."

"Closing in on Mil'gromal, Admiral."

Admiral Phyken reached to his left, to the master control board of his ship, the *Eliteness*. "Away team, prepare for descent. We will launch when I reach the shuttle. Admiral out."

"Sir, I must question this tactic. If the reports are true-"

Phyken showed no anger on his face, but lashed out with his left hand, slapping Captain Y'tha across the face.

"You question your Admiral." Statement, not question. "Lock yourself in your quarters, Captain." He nodded to two

female ensigns on the bridge. "Take her away and prepare her for her punishment. I shall administer it myself when I return." He smiled at Y'tha who said nothing in response. He paid her no mind as he left the bridge and headed down the hall of the Eliteness towards the shuttle that would bring them to the surface.

Phyken had been a lifetime member of the Shi'ar Imperial Space Corps.

He lived for moments like this.

To descend like doom from the sky onto a planet in a starship the locals couldn't fathom. To exit in full regalia, cape sweeping in the breeze, to see the dirt soaked faces looking up at him in fear ...

Admiral Phyken was certain this was going to be a very good day, indeed.

When he got back, Captain Y'tha would help him make it even better. Whether she liked it or not.

THE PLANET THOMAS X2

HAWKEYE, BETA RAY BILL and KOFI

"Hawkeye, Chairman of the Avengers. From, uh, Earth," Hawkeye rubbed his head through the back of his mask. He looked around again at the sight. They were in a small jail on a distant planet that looked just like Latveria.

"I know," Kofi Whitemane smiled up at him. "I was on Earth for a bit. With Power Pack."*

**** Hey, everyone read POWER PACK, right? -- Uh, I had three issues but lost them in a poker game Biscuit...***

"Power Pack? The kids? I loved those guys! I wished I was doing that at 13. Small universe, I guess," Hawkeye smiled at the creature he thought looked like a small white seahorse with legs and arms, turning to Bill. "So what do we do now?"

"We get Kofi back safely to his father," Bill answered, trying hard to look like he wasn't in pain. "Once Kofi has been returned, his father will give his people the okay to attack Doom."

"It'll never work!" scoffed one of the five guards that Hawkeye had ensnared with various trick arrows.* "Emperor Doom can not be stopped. The will of the people are behind him!"

*** *Last Issue - Bola Arrow Biscuit ...***

"Those are some stupid people, then," Hawkeye scoffed.

"Do not be so sure, Hawkeye," Kofi replied softly. "Those who have been to Earth know the kind of man that Doom is, but there is little doubting that while he may be despicable to us, he treats the people under his rule well. Did you notice how he rebuilt this place to look like Latveria? The same thing happens on every planet he comes across. For some of the planets, it is a tragedy. But for planets like Thomas X2, the conditions Doom leaves a planet in are a thousand times better than they were before. There is no crime in the streets any more. There is taxes to be certain, but they are not what they were under the rule of the oppressive Shi'ar."

"The criminal speaks the truth, strangers," the guard with an arrow stuck in the sleeve of his shirt answered, pulling himself free but not making any moves of aggression. "Emperor Doom may be the lesser of two evils, but isn't that all you can ask for out of life? To not have the worst that life has to offer?"

"Tell him, Guteri!" one of the other guards yelled.

Hawkeye looked at these people dumbfounded. This was Victor Von Doom. They were talking about him like he was Braveheart or something.

"You don't know the guy you're dealing with," Hawkeye informed the guards, but he could tell by the looks on their

faces that they didn't care.

"And do you truly know the Shi'ar, stranger?" Guteri asked.

Hawkeye had no answer.

EARTH - DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES

USAGENT

Jack Walker, aka USAgent, hung quietly in the shadows of the alley behind Councilman Mike Proctor's office at his community outreach center, Helping Hands. Agent had busted the Councilman, finding him with crates of smuggled cocaine, a few days ago.*

**** WEST COAST AVENGERS # 108***

Others may have been happy that Proctor was behind bars, but Agent wasn't. It bothered him that the people who had tipped him off hadn't called him back, yet. Jack wasn't upset that they didn't so much as tell him 'Thank you' (there was no need to thank someone for doing their duty) but that they hadn't called with more tips.

This was important.

Jack didn't think of himself as an overly complicated man. That's not to say that Jack was a stupid man by any means. He knew what he believed in and he believed in it strongly.

As far as drugs were concerned, Jack saw no need to think of them as anything but bad.

Just Say No.

It didn't have to be more complex than that.

That anyone would sell drugs bothered Jack, but when that person was a City Councilman, a man of the community, a man who had built a large and growing political base ... it made Jack sick and he was determined to find every last person responsible.

Besides, he needed to get out in the open air for a bit. Jolt and Lightning could handle watching the monitors, Agent needed to act.

A light was turned on in a second floor window.

Proctor's window.

It was a hot night in Los Angeles, typical and for once, Jack thought as he wiped sweat from his face, welcome.

"--damn air conditioner isn't working. We need to get this fixed!" came a voice from the window.

"How are we going to pay for it, Jonesy? Geez-US, with Michael in jail all our assets are frozen. We can't afford to do anything. If he doesn't get out soon, we won't even have money for phones!"

Quiet. They were thinking. Just what Agent wanted.

"What do you think, Joe? Think Michael really did it?"

"Course not, Jonesy. Geez, cut it out with that talk. That's just what them government agents want us saying."

"Yeah, I mean, how could Michael even afford to pay for that stuff?"

"Yeah, it's not like we're floating in cash here. We could barely afford phones before this. If it wasn't for ... hell, we wouldn't have even been able to buy the warehouse that he was busted in. Thank heavens for large anonymous donations ..."

Silence. Thinking.

"Don't say it, Joe."

"What?"

"I know what you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking anything."

"Good, then you won't be saying anything."

Silence.

"Let's go get something to eat."

"Sure, Jonesy."

Agent squeezed his hands in anger. They were thinking something, but what? Here were two people who worked for the Councilman standing in his office and thinking bad thoughts. Was it just the fantasized thinking of someone who saw a friend in jail, charged with an unbelievable crime and then tried to make that fit with their prior image of a saintly man? The sight of Michael Proctor in jail for possession and intent to sell of cocaine was a shock to everyone, a thought so jarring to what people had come to believe that their minds were searching for any possible past events to hang conspiracy on.

But was there anything there? Who was the anonymous donor?

Agent was determined to get to the bottom of this before the Whackos returned from space.

THE SPACECRAFT LATVERIA VIII

Dr. Doom was pleased.

Things were going well.

Reports from Chambeezer indicated that one thousand new Doombots were fully functional and ready for the Assault on Hollandinia.

Reports from Mil'gromal indicated that fifty new starships were in final preparations. The foolish factory managers had tried to convince him that they needed more time to ready the ships. They had begged for another two weeks so they could properly furnish the crafts with pleasantries to make life inside the ship easier on it's crews.

Doom exploded at them. "Warships have no need to comfort it's crews, soft fools! An enemy is not defeated by trinkets, it is defeated by might! There will be time for comfort after I have achieved my goal!"

The savages had no mind for war, Doom knew. It was no wonder the Shi'ar had oppressed them for centuries. Mil'gromalans were soft drones with dreams of scented pillows before freedom. They relied on transplanted Shi'ar slaves to do the physical labor on the ships, to build the machines that the Mil'gromalans created on paper.

They were pathetic.

But they were good at the one thing Doom needed them for: getting warships built.

He smiled just thinking about the starships.

THE PLANET MIL'GROMAL

WONDER MAN and CANNONBALL

"Woo-hoo!"

Samuel Gurhrie, Cannonball, blasted through the large factory that produced Doom's warships. It was fun to cut loose, even with the gravity of the situation. To not worry about anything at all, save for how fast could he fly and how much damage could he enact.

The factory was massive and it was only one of at least ten.

"We can hunt around for some explosives, maybe?" he had offered as a suggestion to Simon Williams, Wonder Man.

"Look at the size of these factories, Sam," Wonder Man had answered. "There isn't enough weaponry on the planet, I bet, that can destroy this any better than we can. Man, I wish Photo- err, Lady Merveille was here. She could really cut loose inside these factories."

"So what are we going to do? We can't just bash stuff, can we?"

"Oh, that's exactly what we're going to do, kid," Simon smiled.

As Sam smashed through a collection of gun turrets ready to be fitted onto warships - inside a room, he noted, that was probably twice the size of Professor Xavier's entire estate in Westchester County - he remembered that he was going to question Simon's plan. It seemed that even though these factories stretched to the horizon, there was no need to call undue attention onto themselves. But then he saw the look on Simon's face, the smile that let it be known that this was exactly what he needed.

Sam decided not to argue.

Wonder Man had practically been a walking zombie since Sam had started staying up with the Avengers.*

**** WEST COAST AVENGERS 107 - Fun in the Sun Biscuit ...***

Apparently he was pining over the Scarlet Witch. From what he had gathered from Tigra, Simon had confessed his deep love for Wanda Maximoff or was going to or something* ... Sam had to admit it was kinda hard to pay close attention to anything when Tigra was around.

**** Check out the SCARLET WITCH LS on the Dark Lore Branch - Spooky Biscuit ...***

Tigra was ... well, Sam supposed, she was almost like an adult version of Tab.* Except she was furry ... and didn't swear as much. And well, she had a tail. But they were both moody creatures who loved to flirt when in the mood and had no shame about their bodies.

**** Sam's ex-girlfriend, the member of X-Force known as Meltdown - Boom Boom Biscuit ...***

But man, there was just something about Tigra that Sam was really taken with. She was amazingly athletic and fast (and furry), but still really vulnerable. Tab would often try to hide her hurt under a tough attitude, but with Tigra there was none of that. She was completely open with her feelings.

Sam rocketed into another room, this one larger than the one he had just exited, to find what he gathered were rocket thrusters. He didn't give it much more thought. Whatever they were, they were inside the factory and thus an open target to be hit. He smashed through them, knowing that he didn't need to level the place, just damage it.

Below him, Simon Williams looked up and smiled. For almost the first time since he returned from the "dead",* Simon felt completely happy and free. Wanda was gone from his thoughts as he took almost childlike joy in being able to smash things.

*** *AVENGERS # 407 - Ionic Engrams Biscuit ...***

"WONDER MAN SMASH!" he yelled, the ionic energy that swirled where his eye-balls should have been dancing energetically. He stomped across the factory, walking like a Fankenstien monster - a Frankenstin monster that stopped every few feet and layed into a piece of equipment with a roundhouse right. "My fists hit as hard as Thor's hammer!" he screamed, not knowing if it was true these days - or if it ever really was. He didn't care - it was his catch slogan and it felt good to let it burst forth from his lungs.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, his unreturned love for Wanda Maximoff nagged at him, but another voice, a voice that was getting louder, a voice that fed Simon's ego, was letting him know that maybe, just maybe, if he could return to acting ... maybe ... just maybe ...

He knew Wanda based her emotions towards men around the Vision, the man that was Simon's "brother". He needed to be as different from Vizh as he could.

Above, Cannonball looked down and shrugged. Whatever Wonder Man was thinking, he was certainly having a good time.

RRROOOOOOOOOOOOPPPPPPPAAAAAAA!!!!!!

The lights in the factory turned on, the bright lights pelting Sam's eyes.

RRROOOOOOOOOOOOOPPPPPPAAAAAAAAAA!!!!

The planet suddenly came alive with noise.

RRROOOOOOOOOOOOOPPPPPPAAAAAAAAAA!!!!

Cannonball and Wonder Man both looked at each other and shrugged. If they could bash their way through a square mile of machinery and not cause any alarms to ring out, what exactly could?

EARTH - AVENGERS COMPOUND

JOLT, SHAPE and LIVING LIGHTNING

"Jolt, how can you watch this stuff?" Miguel Santos asked as MARVEL FANFARE, the nightly news show on the Super Channel Network, played on the big screen in front of them, slumping further into the couch. "It's superheroes treated as entertainment."

Jolt squished her nose and tossed a cheese puff at the hero known as Living Lightning. "Please, call me Hallie. I'm not surprised you don't like this, Miguel, you just don't know how to have fun."

"Shape knows how to have fun!" Shape yelled enthusiastically from the chair on the other side of the room. "Watch!" The rotund ex-member of the Squadron Supreme that could contort his elastic body into other shapes grabbed the cheese puff bowl off the table and tossed it high into the air.

"Shape!" Jolt and Lightning yelled, laughing as Shape pushed his two hands together, making a large funnel out of them. He placed the small end at his mouth and the large end above him, catching about half the cheese puffs as they fell. He paid the ones he missed no mind as he munched loudly on the ones that funnelled down towards his mouth.

"Shape love cheese styrofoam!"

Jolt and Lightning laughed comfortably together, enjoying the company and allowing themselves to forget everything.

"It's odd," Hallie said quietly, turning to watch *Fanfare* , "how quickly all the bad stuff can just disappear."

"Odd, but beautiful, Hallie," Miguel said quietly as Shape continued to munch away on the cheese puffs. "It's a way of keeping sane. Listen to me, I sound like an old pro. You've probably done as much as I have." He shook his head, smiling. "We have to enjoy the moments that life gives us that are enjoyable, no matter how bad the rest may be. If we don't, we go crazy."

"Or turn into the Punisher," Hallie smiled.

"Yeah," Miguel answered.

"We make an odd couple, Miguel," Hallie forced a smile. "You can be an Avenger and don't want to. I want to be an Avenger and can't because I'm too young, but as you said, I've probably got just as much experience as you do. Weird."

Whatever Miguel was going to answer, Hallie wouldn't find out as the television screen changed from highlights of an empty East Coast Avengers Mansion* to that of USAgent staring them in the face.

*** *Where are the Avengers? If saying ROM and ULTRON doesn't get you to check out AVENGERS 429, then I don't know what will. -- Biscuit-Mark 2***

"Lightning! I need you down at the Whiskey immediately! A group of Moloids are crawling out of a hole in the ground and the crowd is starting to panic!"

"I'll be right there, Agent!" Miguel yelled.

"I'm coming, too, Agent!" Jolt jumped up.

"No. You're not," Agent answered and shut his communicard off.

"Miguel, I-!" Jolt started to plead, but was cut off.

"No, Hallie," Miguel said softly. "If you want to be an Avenger, you have to learn when to follow orders and when to speak your mind. This isn't the time for an argument. I'll be back soon."

With a flash of light, Living Lightning was gone.

THE PLANET CHAMBEEZER

LADY MERVEILLE and TIGRA

Tigra and Lady Merveille stood on the side of a hill, overlooking 250 Doombots marching in formation across a brick courtyard. This was the second battallion of 250 that they had watched run through drills. The first group had been here when they arrived, marching in the same formations, running through the same drills.

**** Last issue***

Then they had gone inside a large castle (this planet's Castle Doom), only to be replaced by a different set of 250 Doombots.

Tigra and Lady Merveille had been watching the formations trying to decide on a plan of action. Merveille shook her head.

"What's wrong?" Tigra asked.

"I shouldn't be here," Merveille shook her head.

'Wonderful,' Tigra thought, 'first I was having confidence issues and now Merveille is.' She looked at the former Avengers Chairman carefully. "What's wrong? Second thoughts about coming all the way out here?"

"Hrm?" Monica snapped to attention. "What? Oh, no, Tigra, it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"I shouldn't be here, on Chambeezer. I should be over on Mil'gromal, taking out the warships and Wonder Man should be here."

Tigra bristled, thinking that Merveille was giving her a slam by saying that this mission was too easy, but that wasn't the case and Greer was glad that she hadn't said anything when Merveille spoke again.

"You see, Tigra," Monica started, pointing at the Doombots, "if these are Doom class suits of armor, then I don't think any of my energy forms will be able to do much good against them. They're bound to have all kinds of, for lack of a better term, surge protectors built into them. But if I was over on Mil'gromal taking out the warships, then I could zap through there at my highest speed, causing enough damage to the ships to keep them grounded. These aren't search and destroy missions so much as 'let's cause Doom to delay his attack' missions."

"But could Simon have an easier time with the Doombots than you could. Wouldn't he be in just as much danger of failing this mission?"

"Probably," Monica shrugged, "but stopping the warships seems to me to be the more important of the two missions. The Doombots control the planets after the warships have taken them under Doom's control. Certainly they help with the battles, but if the ships can't get to a planet then Doom can't conquer it."

"So you think Hawkeye's full of crackers?" Tigra asked, curious. "You think he made a bad call?"

Merveille turned to look at Tigra, speaking quickly, "I'm sure he's got his reasons and this isn't a bad plan. I'm just not sure if it's the best one."

Tigra nodded and turned back to the marching Doombots in the distance. "So what do we do now?"

"I'm going to head to the south of the castle and put on a light display to see if there's any reaction. You're going to go north and see if you can sneak inside the castle and see

what's what. Hopefully you can find a big red off button that will shut these machines down."

"What if it's a big blue button?" Tigra smiled.

"Hey, take what you can get."

Lady Merveille smiled and flashed away.

THE PLANET AK'YEN'JA

QUICKSILVER and FALCON

"He is a powerful man," Chieftain Ioeya of the Eaau nodded slowly as he spoke.

"Yes, we know," Quicksilver tried to not let his agitation through as he looked around the small cave that Ioeya lived in.

"We were his first planet," Ioeya continued, his voice monotone and low.

"Congratulations," Pietro snapped, but Ioeya paid him no mind.

"Do not mock us, stranger!" Ja'lana, leader of the Ba'na'ay stepped forward, an act almost impossible in the cramped quarters. "We did not ask for Victor to come here and take away everything we had!"

"Why is that you call him Victor?" Falcon asked, trying to stop an escalating argument.

"That is his name," Ja'lana answered.

"True," Falcon conceded, "but he isn't so ... informal on our world."

"Congratulations," Ja'lana snapped back.

"Enough!" Pietro fumed. "We're leaving."

"We didn't ask for you to come either, stranger," Ja'lana accused, "so don't act like we should be trying to make you stay."

"I told you we would find nothing of value here!" Quicksilver snapped to the Falcon. "We have seen defeated Doom a hundred times on our world, what could we possibly hope to gain here? That Doom had amnesia?" Pietro snorted. "Memory makes no difference for a man like Doom. Evil is evil no matter what one calls himself."

Quicksilver burst out of the cave and into the desert, disappearing quickly onto the horizon.

"Pleasant fellow," Ja'lana chided.

"He is burdened with hardships you couldn't dream of, lady," Falcon shot back.

Ja'lana looked around at the small cave. "Really? I find that doubtful."

"Then you shouldn't open your mouth," Falcon stared at her hard. "On our world, Pietro's father is a man that many consider to be the equal of Victor. A man that many consider to be a savior, but most consider to be one of the most dangerous men alive." He turned to leave, "So before you write him off take into account what you see on your world and then think of how you'd feel if it was your father who had caused the destruction." Falcon turned back one last time, his body a silhouette in the fading light of Ak'yen'ja's day. "Because just like Victor, Magneto can cause a planet to shudder with but a glance."

Ja'lana said nothing, but scoffed at the ground. It was clear to Falcon that she did not like to be talked to in this manner.

Tough.

"Take this, Falcon," Ioeya said quietly, his head continuing to nod and his eyes never leaving the small fire in front of him. He reached into his robes and produced a small red ruby that could be completely covered by his frail hand.

Falcon stepped forward and took the stone from Ioeya. "What is it, sir?"

Ioeya looked up from the fire, but the flames continued to dance in his eyes. "It is the Heart of Ak'yen'ja."

EARTH - LOS ANGELES

JOLT and SHAPE

Jolt pouted, slamming her foot onto the ground.

"What wrong, Jolt?" Shape asked.

"Nothing."

Shape started to speak again, but thought better of it and shut his mouth to watch television.

Hallie steamed. Everything about this place was turning bad for her. There wasn't anything she could do except enroll in school, but how was that supposed to do her any good. She'd seen things with the Thunderbolts that the schools couldn't teach her. "Ack." She could hear Hawkeye now, "You go to school to learn, so you can discover why things work, why certain situations are more blah blah blah blah ..."

Jolt wanted to be an Avenger and saw no reason why she shouldn't be allowed to be one. She deserved her shot.

She reached for a cheese puff, only to discover an empty bowl. In anger she slapped the bowl off the table, causing Shape to retreat into his seat in fear. Desperate to take any kind of action she reached for the remote control to change the channel, but thought better of it.

If SCN was any good, they'd cut to a live feed of what was going on in the city with Agent and Lightning.

Nothing. Just another story, this one about Black Panther.

"... and in other news," Craig Winters segued into another topic, "there's rumors that the superfreak that puts Rick James to shame has been spotted in northern Colorado. Yes,

Mr. No Neck himself, Arnim Zola, has reportedly been captured on videotape by amateur photographers hunting for a glimpse of Bigfoot. But they didn't find Bigfoot. If they did, we'd call this segment Wookie Fever, but they didn't, so you get the Superfreak joke."

Jolt was on her feet and out the door before she realized what she was doing.

She was going after Zola, the man who had kept her as a captive in some secret laboratory.*

**** See the first year of THUNDERBOLTS -- Baron Biscuit ...***

She should wait for the Avengers, she knew, but to hell with them, she thought. They didn't want to help her before, why would they want to help her now? No, this was something Jolt had to do on her own.

To hell with the Avengers.*

**** What happens next to Jolt? Check out NEW WARRIORS # 80 for the shocking answer! - A Plug for Lander Biscuit ...***

As Hallie Takahama was vanishing into the dark night, Shape watched on from the back doorway, confused and worried about his friend Jolt.

USAGENT and LIVING LIGHTNING

A group of twenty Moloids shrieked in panic as the blaring sirens and shouts from a growing crowd closed in on them. Shouts of "Freak!" and "Bug Eyes!" poured down on them, but they took no meaning from the words, only the feelings of the insults.

Somehow the small, almost colorless creatures managed to stay close together.

FZZZZZZZT!

Living Lightning flashed down next to USAgent, startling the Moloids. "What's the situation, Agent?" he shouted over

the crowd, who was desperately trying to shield the Moloids.

Agent thought it was obvious, but he relayed the answer as if Miguel was a superior officer. "Moloids came through the crack in the pavement by the Whiskey's front entrance, there!" he pointed to a large hole in the ground. "Crowd is getting out of control. Apparently some big shot rock group was about to perform in the club and now they refuse to because of the Moloids."

"Doesn't look like they pose a threat," Lightning added.

"By themselves, they don't," Agent confirmed. "But just their appearance has the crowd worked up and since they're the unwitting cause of the concert's delay, it's not long before something bad happens." Agent flashed his shield up just in time to deflect a tossed beer bottle. "Do something about this crowd, Lightning!"

Miguel nodded, flashing into lightning form and taking to the air. He hung there for a second, glowing bright, drawing the attention of a part of the crowd upwards and then flashed brilliantly causing everyone but Agent, who was waiting for it, to cover their eyes and back away.

"Everyone down!" Agent roared, but many had already stumbled over themselves in an attempt to shield their eyes and were on the ground as it was.

Lightning put the Moloids between him and the fissure in the pavement and kept slowly moving towards them, flashing over and over again. The Moloids backed away in fear, all the way into the fissure and then back down under the earth.

The threat was avoided.

"Good work, kid," Agent shook Miguel's hand as he came to stand by him.

"Thanks. What were you doing here anyways?"

"Following a lead on the Proctor case," Agent said sternly.

"What's new?"

"What's not?" Agent replied, uncharacteristically answering a question with a question. "Councilman Proctor's either been played for a fool for a long time, or he's more rotten than I imagined."

THE SCUTTLEBUTT

HAWKEYE and BETA RAY BILL

Kofi looked back at Hawkeye and Beta Ray Bill from the other side of a viewscreen. A large Kymelian stood behind him.

"We thank you for rescuing and returning young Kofi," he announced formally. Hawkeye figured the transmission was probably being taped for some kind of political use back in Kymelian society. Some things are all the same.

"Hey, no problem," Hawkeye announced. "But what was a teen-aged kid doing out here in the middle of space?" Hell, Clint thought, if this guy was going to use this for their own political benefit, Clint was going to make him earn it.

"Young Kofi was on ... a secret mission for our people," the man bristled.

"Ah, okay, I won't pry," Hawkeye smiled back, as smugly as he could. Like hell he was on a secret mission.

"And now we must depart. The Kymelians are in your debt."

Before Hawkeye could answer, the transmission was cut.

"Are you sure that was the right thing to do?" Hawkeye asked Beta Ray Bill, glad to be back aboard the Scuttlebutt.

They were on the way to Hollandinia, the tenth most advanced planet in the Shi'ar Empire. It was the planet that Doom had next on his list to conquer. Where Mil'gromal - the planet with Wonder Man and Cannonball - built warships, Hollandinia built War Cruisers. The warships that Sam and

Simon were trying to stop held crews of 1000. The War Cruisers held crews of 50,000.

But more importantly, Hollandinia was one of the Shi'ar's State Centers, training those that would serve in her military. The War Cruisers would give Doom the might to make a strike against the Shi'ar Throneworld, but the recruits from the State Center would give him the means to make that strike effective.

"Saving young Kofi?" Beta Ray Bill asked in response. "Yes. Of course. Or did you mean spitting in the face of the Kymelian ambassador?"

Hawkeye waved his hand in disgust, ignoring Bill's comment. "He didn't look like he was in too much trouble. You don't think it would've been better to stop Doom and then go back and rescue Kofi?"

Beta Ray Bill turned to look at Hawkeye, taking full measure of the Avengers Chairman.

"If we had lost, who would have saved him?"

Hawkeye frowned as he turned to look out a window. "I thought I remember hearing from someone that your ship was sentient. Isn't it supposed to talk to us?"

"She speaks only when it is required."

Hawkeye kicked at the ground, "Are we sure Kofi's people will give us some kind of military support?"

"Kofi's father will do what he can. As will we." Bill paused, sliding slowly into his next question, "A question for you Hawkeye, if you don't mind. Why did you send Wonder Man to-?"

"You mean, why did I put Merveille on the mission to stop the Doombots and Wonder Man to stop the warships when it looks like the other way would be best?"

"Exactly."

"Simple, I didn't want Wonder Man and Tigra together. They're both in down periods emotionally and I didn't want them leaning onto each other and get sidetracked from the mission. I put Tigra with Merveille because I figured she could get Tigra to be the most effective out of anyone. She was Chairman of the East Coast team for awhile a few years back and did a damn good job from what I hear."

"Sound reasoning, Hawkeye," Bill nodded, again gripping his side in pain.

"So what happened to you, anyway?" Hawkeye asked. "You try to hide it, but you're in need of medical attention."

Beta Ray Bill's expression grew darker. "I was travelling through space, in search of the Silver Surfer when I came across Doom's War Cruiser. I didn't have Scuttlebutt with me, so I had to take on the War Cruiser alone."

"And you lost, huh?" Hawkeye asked.

"No," Bill answered seriously. "I saved the planet from falling into Doom's hands ... for a time being, at least. Since returning to the Scuttlebutt, I have radioed the planet constantly, but I have yet to get a response."

"You took on a War Cruiser and won?" Hawkeye asked incredulously.

"I won a battle, if not the war," Bill answered solemnly, punching at the controls of his ship. "We're here, at Hollandinia. Let us lay a trap for Doctor Doom."

THE LATVERIA VIII

Dr. Doom stood listening to the reports, his rage beginning to grow to dangerous levels.

Dangerous for those around him.

He stood in his warship a hyperspace jump from his assault on Hollandinia, waiting only for the warships from Mil'gromal to rendezvous with the Doombots from

Chambeezer. The Doombots would serve as the ships' crews for this assault.

A report had just come in, however, that something was damaging ships at the Mil'gromalan factories and that not all the ships would make the trip to--

"Emperor," a young technician spoke nervously, "another report possibly d-damagning to the victory at Hollandinia h-has come in." T-this one fr-from Chambeezer."

Doom fed on his anger, letting it grow and holding it in.

It was the energy he lived on.

"Show me."

Doom watched the large viewscreen in front of him at a live feed from the Castle Doom on Chambeezer. A wide display of lights was flashing across the night time sky, causing all the Doombots to look above them. None of them made any action against the light display.

Doom seethed.

He knew just what it was.

"Avengers."

Saying nothing more, Dr. Doom walked to a large controlboard to the left on the bridge. A tech standing at the console immediately left to the side, eager to avoid confrontation with her new Emperor.

Doom punched at the controlboard in precise motions. On the screen, all the Doombots standing outside the Castle watching Merveille moved again. They spread out in a large circle, extending their arms to either side of them, touching knuckles to knuckles.

The circle, was, of course, perfect in alignment.

The flashing lights above them slowed a bit revealing a female form and Doom saw just what he expected to see. "The former Captain Marvel," he said to no one in particular,

but all those on the bridge had heard of another Captain Marvel and if this one was anything like the one they knew, they knew her to be a formidable opponent.

The Doombots hummed to life suddenly and when Merveille moved her powers into the part of the electromagnetic spectrum that was radio waves, she was instantly sucked down into the circle of Doombots, screaming in pain. The Doombots brought their arms forward, pointing their knuckles at a howling Merveille.

They spread their fingers in a sharp motion and Monica Rambeau was ripped apart, her form splitting into 25,000 separate entities, one for each finger on the Doombot's gauntlets.

THE PLANET CHAMBEEZER

TIGRA

Tigra had been drawn to the window when she heard the clanking of Doombot heels.

She became worried when she saw Merveille forced to the ground.

Alarmed when she saw the pain she was in.

Lost when she saw Lady Merveille ripped into electric bits.

Tigra stood at the window of Castle Doom, her mouth agape. She was all alone on a planet with 1000 Doombots and it was up to her and her alone to stop them.

Tigra set her jaw and turned from the window.

Time to get to work.

THE PLANET MIL'GROMAL

WONDER MAN and CANNONBALL

Simon Williams and Sam Guthrie ran outside and flew into the air to look out across the roof tops of the factories.

The sky was raining molten lava down on top of them.

A Shi'ar warship had dropped into the atmosphere and was blasting the factories of Mil'gromal to pieces with photon canons. The ship was massive, Cannonball and Wonder Man both glad that the ship was focusing its attack on the rim of the horizon. Blast after blast reigned down onto the surface, everyone setting off an explosion.

"George Lucas eat your heart out," Wonder Man gasped in awe.

"It's incredible," Sam gasped. "We-we've got to do something."

"Huh?" Wonder Man asked. "Why? The Shi'ar are doing a better job at this than we could do in weeks."

They watched in silence for a few moments longer, only half-believing what they were seeing. The weight of their mission grabbed them by their throats and didn't let go. The laughter and joy they had been feeling about being able to cut loose were gone.

"Just think," Cannonball finally said, "think about what would happen if we don't stop Doom." He shook his head, again thinking of his family back home in Kentucky. "This could be Earth ..."

"Aaaarrgghh!" Cannonball and Wonder Man screamed into the night air as they were hit with a beam from above that ensnared them in a cocoon of energy.

They could nothing but scream as they were pulled upwards towards a small craft that had come up from behind them.

Inside the ship that was the size of a Quinjet, a tall man's smile grew wider.

"Subjects have been captured, Admiral Phyken. We're drawing them in now."

"Excellent," Phyken grinned at the destruction of the factories of Mil'gromal. He had found, much to his surprise

upon entering Mil'gromal's atmosphere that the factories were busy producing and storing warships that hadn't been reported to the Shi'ar Empire.

Not to mention, as was apparent from the planet's devastation and partially rebuilt cities in a style that was decidedly non-Shi'ar in origin, that they were being produced for whomever this new Emperor was.

Phyken grudgingly had to admit that he was impressed at whoever it was that had managed to turn this planet against the Shi'ar. Such a man might be useful in Phyken's own quest for power.

Once the dog was taught a lesson, of course.

The door behind them opened and Cannonball and Wonder Man were led in, their handles manacled in front of them, kept aloft by a bar that was connected to the collar around their necks, making sure they couldn't move them. Their feet were manacled together, as well, allowing them only the ability to shuffle along.

Admiral Phyken walked slowly to them and slapped Cannonball across the face, but the blow did nothing. He had been drugged and was beyond this world at the moment. "Insolent pigs," Phyken spoke down to them, his seven foot tall frame towering over all around him. "How dare you take a Shi'ar planet."

"Hey, pal," Wonder Man groused, "we were destroying the place, too."

"Is that so?" Phyken asked, snapping his fingers to the right of him three times.

"Yeah, that's so," Wonder Man forced through his teeth, straining against the bonds which to his disappointment he had discovered were kinetic. The more he fought against them, the stronger they became. "So why don't you let us out of these dog collars and chains and let us get back to doing the same thing you're here for."

"I don't think so, defiler," Phyken smiled as one of the crew members brought him a thin gold wire. "Do you know what this is?" he asked, lifting the thin wire into the air.

Simon didn't answer and Sam couldn't. His head rolled around in the bonds, drool falling from his mouth.

"It's a Grellian Assassin Wire," Phyken flashed it in front of their faces. "It's quite remarkable. An assassin slips it around her victim's throat - all Grellian Assassins are female, lovely creatures, really - and bring the ends together behind the person's neck. When the wire ends are crossed," Phyken demonstrated the act in the air, "the wires flash alive with energy, easily slicing through almost any object. And if that object is flesh, the wire automatically cauterizes the wound behind it, leaving no mess. Would you like a demonstration?" Phyken asked, taking a step towards Sam.

"No."

"Ah, I can see that you're a strong one," Phyken nodded in respect to Wonder Man. "I bet I could slice this boy into a thousand pieces and you wouldn't give up what you know. I wonder how you could deal with pain when it's being inflicted upon yourself."

Simon struggled against his bonds as Phyken walked towards him, stopping before Simon's arms.

Wonder Man said nothing, but stared directly into Phyken's eyes from behind his sunglasses. The Shi'are Admiral removed the glasses from Simon's face, starting in surprise at the ionic energy that floated where eyes should have been. "What are you?" he asked, then answered his own question. "It matters not! You are clearly the enemy of the Shi'ar. Your torture begins!"

"I'll try to do this as slowly as possible," he grinned, draping the Grellian wire around Simon's left arm, connecting the ends together in the back. Energy slithered

across the wire's surface. "It's almost alive," Phyken smiled, locking eyes with Wonder Man.

Slowly, steadily, Admiral Phyken began to slice Wonder Man's left hand off.

WORLD WITHOUT to be continued ...

WEST COAST LINES

send comments to mariner2@tiac.net

I'm at the point now where I know where all these characters are going, so hopefully you'll see an improvement in the characterizations from here on out.

From Manuel Chavarria

Incredible.

That's the word that springs to mind as I read your West Coast Avengers run. I've been a fan of the WCA since their inception into the Marvel Universe, and I'm glad to see them restored to greatness (as you've mentioned, there wasn't much to sing the praises of after Englehart left.).

I'm not exactly sure what to focus on, since I'm loving it all, but here's some various compliments: I love seeing Hawkeye as leader, a role I haven't seen him in for a long time. The addition of the Shape has made for some hilarious scenes. Cannonball is a welcome addition as well. I've always been a fan of the USAgent, and I'm enjoying your take on him. Pietro's return would be a joy to read. And, following your excellent Fantastic Four run, I'm glad to see that you've picked up the Doom storyline, as Doom is definitely comics' greatest villain.

As ever, I'm finding myself enjoying whatever title you take the reins of. I suppose there's nothing left to say but "keep up the good work." Obviously, you will.

Thanks, Manuel. As I've said elsewhere, I felt bad that I left Doom hanging out in the middle of space

where no one else could write him unless they went into space and ran into him, so I've designed this storyline to allow a writer to use him on Earth.

From Sam Everett on the mv1talk list:

WEST COAST AVENGERS #109--Cool opening scene in this one. Way to keep a reader's attention, not that I would leave halfway through anyway. After all, there's the Agent/Falcon confrontation to worry about! It's good to see Tigra being more mature under Biscuit, but I wonder if there is a story behind it;

she's so much more human that can in this issue that there must be a reason for it I personally like a combination of both personalities. And Doom? I never saw that coming! Can I take a guess at the three new Avengers? Quicksilver (Kooky Quartet), Photon (new name) and Cannonball (never been an Avenger before)!

Thanks, Sam. As for your guesses, as you can see, you were correct on all accounts! There's some fun stuff coming from Agent and Falcon, both here and elsewhere.

From Barry "Speed Force" Reese:

Hi Mark,

Just read the newest issue and I have to say -- I'm loving this series. This was the best one yet and I'm pleased to see you returning to the 'Doom in Space' stuff. I figured out who it was from the opening scene but it was still a blast.

I like the tight interplay going on between this book and Hawkeye. I wish real Marvel used this kind of continuity -- I'm trying to do the same sort of thing with Black Knight and Crusaders, though it's not as much fun since the Crusaders stories have been posted for months.

Loved the Falcon/USAgent moments. Sam will make a great addition to the group if he stays around -- Pietro too.

But man, with Pietro and USAgent on the same team, these guys could be real grumps. Good thing Jolt and Shape are around to lighten the mood. I love the large cast you're assembling -- my favorite Avengers period was the Englehart 70s run when everybody and their brother would hang out with the team for awhile and the membership was very fluid.

Nice intro for the Lighthouse -- very interesting. I can't wait to see more of this.

And now, a fanboy moment as I hit you with some requests :

1) Any chance of a crossover with the FF? I'd love to see you write them one more time.

2) Let's see the WCA head overseas. Mainly even run into some Euro heroes while they're at it. I've never thought the Avengers travelled to other countries enough. Maybe a trip to Japan, since the WCA own the Pacific?

3) Hope to see some appearances by the Night Shift and their former leader, the Shroud.

4) Finally, keep Tigra! She's one of the links to the original Whackos (along with Hawk and Simon), and I'd like to see her stay.

Keep up the good work!

Thanks for the letter, Barry. Lonni and I are trying really hard to keep HAWKEYE and WCA together continuity-wise without having to make anyone read both titles if they don't want to. Basically we try to be consistent with what's going on, so if I have Hawkeye complaining about the lack of teamwork here, over in HAWKEYE he's thinking the same thoughts or doing something about it. It's fun.

Roster - yeah, I like the large cast, too. It wasn't intentional in the sense that I sat down and said, "I

want x number of characters" but after I took a look around to see who was available, I figured to get them all involved if I could. The membership will be fluid throughout the book's run, I think. As for the Falcon/Agent scenes, I'm glad people seem to like them. We'll see more of them in the future. Jolt takes her leave from the cast with this issue, but the book isn't going to turn into a crank fest. There's plenty of fun in the Whackos future.

LIGHTHOUSE will appear in this title from time to time in the near future and take a bow in it's own maxi-series sometime during Year Four of MV1. I'm really excited about that particular project.

As for your requests:

Not anytime soon. I've had my fill with the FF and they're so far behind continuity-wise that it would be tough anyways. I wanted to have **WORLD WITHOUT** involve the FF, either as participants here or as part of a crossover, but that just wasn't possible given where the two projects are. I will write the FF again, though. <PLUG MODE> In fact, if you check out **ALL GOD'S CHILDREN 12 - 14** , there's quite a bit with the FF there. </PLUG MODE>

I agree and plan to move the Whackos around more than we're used to seeing.

No major plans for Night Shift or Shroud here at the moment, but an appearance isn't out of the question.

As for Tigra ... all I'll promise is that she's not the next character to leave the cast. I've got some plans for the character, though, so she won't disappear.

That's all for now, folks.

Also This Month: HAWKEYE # 15 by Lonni Holland! - The Old West Saga continues! Join Hawkeye and Two-Gun Kid for some all out MV1 Western action!

NEXT ISSUE: WEST COAST AVENGERS 112 - WORLD WITHOUT continues ... Hawkeye and Bill face off against Doom! Tigra vs. 1,000 Doombots! Lady Merveille makes an appearance ... or is that 25,000 appearances? Simon Williams sans a left hand! Just what is the Heart of Ak'yen'ja and why does Ioeya think it can help the WCA? Crystal, Bova and Luna move into the Compound, but is anyone there to greet them? The Whackos go all out in their missions to stop Dr. Doom!

-- Mark ... 29.March.1999

AVENGERS WEST COAST 112

DEC. YEAR 3 MV1 Presents ... Earth's Mightiest Heroes!!! AVENGERS



And there came a day ... a day when the foes became too great for even Earth's Mightiest Heroes to handle alone!

On that day was born ... the West Coast Avengers!

112 NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS # 112

Hawkeye! Wonder Man! Tigra! USAgent! Cannonball! Quicksilver! Falcon! Lady Merveille!

WORLD WITHOUT

written by Mark Bousquet

Previously ... The Whackos have traveled across the universe to the Shi'ar Galaxy to stop Dr. Doom from extending his intergalactic empire ... Hawkeye and Beta Ray Bill rescued Lord Kofi Whitmane from jail ... Doom has been leveling planets and rebuilding them as Latveria lookalikes ... The Whackos have encountered two tragedies, Lady Merveille has been

ripped to radio waves and Wonder Man has lost his hand to Admiral Phyken ... Doom prepares for his assault on the planet Hollandinia ...

PART FIVE - WHO BE EMPEROR?

THE ELITENESS

WONDER MAN and CANNONBALL

"Aaaaaarrrrggghhhhhh!!!!!! My hand!!!!!!!"

Simon Williams screamed in his kinetic bonds as his left hand lay on the floor, removed from his body.

"I'll kill you, you bastard!!!"

"I hardly think you're in the position to make threats, freak," Admiral Phyken of the Shi'ar Empire grinned down at Wonder Man. "I do not know what you are inside your human appearance, but I see the Grellian Assassin wire has worked as effortlessly as it always has."

Next to Wonder Man stood Cannonball, held in place by two Shi'ar guards. He had no reaction to Simon's predicament, having been drugged the minute he came aboard the small craft* that had eventually flown them back to the Eliteness.

**** Last Issue - Grell Fan Biscuit***

"Hrm, it seems the Grellian wire hasn't worked quite as well as it normally does. Your wound has not been completely cauterized. Simon looked down through the pain to see ionic energy seeping out of the stump that was where his left hand should have been. He could feel himself growing weaker as more and more energy seeped out.

"Admiral Phyken!" a voice cut into the small ship's speakers as it sat in dock aboard the Eliteness. "We have a message from the Majestrix herself!"

"What is it?" Phyken asked quickly, willing to do anything to gain Lilandra's favor.

"Shi'ar ships are ... poised to attack Hollandinia!"

"Those are just rumors," Phyken answered, repeating the state propaganda.

"Begging your pardon, sir," the speaker's voice quavered, causing Phyken to smile at the fear he had instilled in his troops, "they are no longer rumors. This comes from Majestrix Lilandra herself!"

"Set a course for Hollandinia, then!" Admiral Phyken shouted, glad that a battle was about to be joined. "To save the Empire!"

SPACE - NEAR THE PLANET HOLLANDINIA

LATVERIA VIII

Dr. Doom stood aboard his Shi'ar War Cruiser, ready for the assault on Hollandinia. He took his place on the massive bridge, looking out the front screen at the large planet before him. In a large containment field to his left, the Lady Merveille stood, shaken.

Hollandinia was the key to his plan of conquest.

If he could take this planet, with its War Cruiser factories and its State Center of Shi'ar trained cadets, he would be that much closer to taking the entire empire. That was his ultimate goal - to sit as Emperor of the greatest Empire in the entire known universe.

And when he did, he would ride on his steeds of metal and lead an assault on the planet Earth. It would be glorious.

Such was the way of Doom.

"You'll never get away with this!" came the voice of Lady Merveille.

"Ah, Ms. Rambeau speaks at the last," Doom strode to the containment bubble. "The damsel in distress role does not fit one as ... powerful as you."

"How do you-?"

"I know everything, woman," Doom scoffed, waving his hand at her. "I am Doom." He let the words sink in, as he always did, and then continued, "You have put a wrench into the workings of my plan. Why have the Avengers chosen to interfere?"

"To stop you, of course," Merveille said confidently.

"You shall try, I am sure," Doom said gravely. "But it matters not. Nor does it matter that production of my warships on Mil'gromal has hit a delay." *

*** *Last Issue - Bis'cuit***

"What?" Merveille grinned, "Two little Avengers could cause problems to the workings of Dr. Doom? Go figure."

Doom eyed her carefully, "It depends on who the Avengers are, of course. Do not trifle with Doom woman."

"I didn't know you held Wonder Man and Cannonball in such high esteem, Doom. I'm sure they'd be touched."

Doom came as close to the containment bubble as he could. "Wonder Man and Cannonball, you say? Thank you, Monica. I had no idea there were Avengers on Mil'gromal at all - I was referring only to the attack made by the Shi'ar." Doom turned around, smug and confident.

"Call the warships out of hyperspace. It is time. Let the attack on Hollandinia begin here." He turned back to Merveille. "The first attack will come in two hours, Avenger. If your friends are going to do anything, they had better have them already done."

HOLLANDINIA

HAWKEYE and BETA RAY BILL

"Uh ... okay ... I thought this stuff only existed in sci-fi novels," Hawkeye rubbed his hand over the back of his cowl covered head.

"If it can be dreamed, it can be done," Beta Ray Bill answered.

They stood on the Dividing Line - the Hollandian created wall that ran down the center of the planet, from pole to pole and back again. To the Western Hemisphere lay the factories, churning out war cruisers. To the right lay the State Centers where the Shi'ar Admirals of tomorrow were being created today.

The Western half of the planet was charred to bare Earth - metal, steel and large pits of molten fire dominated the landscape. There were no trees, no water, no sign of anything living. Fire exploded from the surface as the hot engines beneath cooled the large slabs of metal that were used to construct the war cruisers. The Eastern Hemisphere was the opposite. Trees, large and floral dominated the landscape, intercut by glowing pools of blue. Universities and Academies of pure white smooth rock blended into the scene.

One side was grey and lava, the other foliage and water.

In the middle, an Avenger and a cyborg warrior who were risking their lives for this sphere, though nobody on the planet had ever heard of either and neither of the two had any love for the Shi'ar masters.

Such was the man that was Doom.

Green balls of light pulsed suddenly before them and when they were gone, Quicksilver and Falcon stood in their place. Greetings were done all around.

"What did you learn on Ak'yen'ja?" Hawkeye asked, referring to the mission he had sent Pietro and Sam on.*

*** *See the last two issues***

"That Dr. Doom is it's Emperor and it's people are backwards fools," Pietro Maximoff scoffed.

"He's right, Hawk," Falcon jumped in, avoiding a comment from the Chairman. "To a point, at least."

"Did you get anything we could use?"

"Only this," Falcon replied and held out a small glittering ruby.

"What is it?" Hawkeye asked, his eyes kept rapt by what looked like fireflies dancing beneath the surface of the ruby.

Falcon answered. "It is the Heart of Ak'yen'ja. The Ak'yen'jans tell us that it is the only hope we have at degeating Doom."

EARTH - AVENGERS COMPOUND

"Hello! Is anybody ... home?"

The last word hung in Crystal's throat as she wondered if, in fact, this really was going to be home or if it was just another stop in her and Pietro's wandering life. She had been happy living on the banks of the Hudson River in a castle of the High Evolutionary. The setting was almost idyllic for raising their daughter Luna, the Knights of Wundagore the perfect companions. But Pietro had become dissatisfied with the lifestyle, and his wandering legs had taken him away from her more and more often.* When he was at home, he was moody and difficult.

**** As with his recent adventures with the X-Men - Check them out at the Four Corners Branch***

Crystal smiled, looking down at Luna, asleep in her arms. To tell someone that Pietro was moody and difficult wouldn't raise many eyebrows.

Nonetheless, the decision to come and join the West Coast Avengers - Pietro as a full-time member and her as a reserve - wasn't one they had entered into lightly, but Crystal was willing to make the move in order to keep her family together.* They had already tried Attilan, the East Coast Avengers and the banks of the Hudson River - they might as well try the West Coast.

**** Which can be evidenced in Marvel Triple Action 48 - At the Avengers Branch Biscuit***

"It does not appear that anyone is home," Bova remarked cautiously.

"No, it doesn't," Crystal frowned, handing the sleeping Luna to Bova to hold. "Perhaps you should wait in the car until I can check to see just what is going on."

A cold, hollow voice cut into the dark entranceway. "That is unnecessary, designate-Crystal." Crystal gasped and stepped in front of Bova and Luna to protect them as she caught just a flash of light reflecting off metal in the background and cold, red eyes of ionic energy dancing alone in the darkness of the Avengers home.

When the metallic, empty voice spoke again, Crystal's blood ran cold.

"There is no one here but me."

THE PLANET CHAMBEEZER

TIGRA

Greer Nelson, the heroine/adventurer known as Tigra crouched low in the ventilation shafts of a Castle Doom that was many, many light years from Latveria. She had seen Lady Merveille ripped to shreds by a battalion of 250 Doombots. That left her completely alone on a planet of 1,000 Doombots that she was now supposed to stop all by herself.

"Yeah, right," she smiled to herself, enjoying the challenge. She had put Monica as far out of her mind as she could. Merveille was one of the most powerful humans on the planet Earth ... she had to be able to take care of herself.

Even if she was ripped apart into 25,000 little bits? Yes, even then.

Tigra had explored the Castle as best she could through the vents and ducts of the old-only-in-appearance castle. She had made her way to the basement levels - there were

at least three and she wondered just how close to the real Castle Doom these were - and she had spent the last hour looking down into a massive room of metal and wire.

It was the room where the Doombots recharged themselves.

It was empty.

Tigra grinned, like a cat about to steal a bowl of cream.

She removed the grate and jumped down, landing easily and softly on her feet. She walked with all the elegance of a cat who walked upright, which is to say she didn't walk so much as pad gracefully across the room, her tail swirling in excitement. As she approached the control board a queer thrill played across her features.

She was going to blow something up real good.

Tigra reached down, undid a panel with her claws and proceeded to shred the wires beneath to disarray. She was not ten seconds into it when the door opened and a battalion of Doombots entered the room, ignoring her as they approached the recharging units.

Greer lay low to the floor, watching them hook themselves into the wall units. She had watched this before with the last battalion so she knew what was supposed to happen. It didn't.

Tigra was going to delay 1,000 Doombots all by herself by cutting off their energy supply. She grinned, enjoying the cream.

THE LATVERIA VIII

Dr. Doom said only one word.

"Begin."

And it did, the first shots fired at a Shi'ar outpost on the moon Lonninnol, hammering deep space communications.

THE PLANET HOLLANDINIA

HAWKEYE, BETA RAY BILL, QUICKSILVER and FALCON

On the planet below, the war sirens rang out immediately and the planet was thrown to chaos.

The three Avengers and Beta Ray Bill made their way through the forest as the Eastern Hemisphere of the planet sounded in alarm. An attack was either on the way or about to start as the Shi'ar hurried to launch their crafts into space and prepare the planetary defense. They moved quickly and precisely, taking no time to look anywhere but in front of them.

"Tell me again why we didn't announce ourselves to the Shi'ar and aid them with their knowledge?" Quicksilver asked dryly.

"'Cause the Shi'ar is no better than Doom," Hawkeye grumbled, not wanting to admit that they were, in fact, playing a part in keeping the universe's biggest intergalactic Empire intact. "Plus, Bill is pretty certain that there's going to be quite a bit of Doom sympathizers down here, so we don't want to play our hand to anyone who's going to betray us to Doom. We're going in to the Governor's room and we're gonna wait there for Doom to arrive. He's always made a big show about taking control right at the seat of power and there's no reason to think this time will be any different."

"We're just going to wait for him and expect him to come to us?" the Falcon asked. "What kind of strategy is that?"

"It's called setting a trap," Hawkeye sighed as he moved some branches out of the way so they could pass. "Haven't you guys read any cowboy novels?"

"You're getting strategy from old dusty cowboy novels? The one's that wrote about the Wild West?" Quicksilver asked, dumbfounded.

"Yeah, what's wrong with that?" Hawkeye asked. "Not all of us Chairmen fought in World War II, you know."

"Yes, Hawkeye, thank you," Quicksilver retorted. "But wasn't the Wild Wild West a fabrication of the glory hungry Wild Bill Hickock?"

Hawkeye stopped and turned around, looking Pietro in the eye. "Depends who you talk to, I suppose." *

**** Hawkeye certainly had a wild time in the Old West, didn't he? - See the Old West Saga going on in HAWKEYE the past few months - Once Upon a Biscuit in the West***

They reached the Governor's Mansion, a large, ornate white building with domed ceiling and glistening towers. "Wanna smash us an entrance, Bill?" Hawkeye asks as he runs his hand over the smooth marble surface.

PsssssssssssssoooooooooooooooooPPOOOWWWWW!!!

The Avengers turned to look at the sky above them to see that a firework had gone off, dropping green gas into the atmosphere. Explosions happened all around them. The precision of the Shi'ar troops was lost as Doom's sympathizers began the counterattack.

"Say one thing for Doom," Hawkeye grumbled. "At least he gave us the diversion we needed. Bill?"

Beta Ray Bill raised his enchanted hammer, Storm Breaker, into the air, wincing at the sharp pain in his side. He brought the hammer around, smashing a hole in the smooth wall.

The Avengers entered in the kitchen and one quick blow from Quicksilver took care of the one cook who had remained in the kitchen. They worked their way through the hallways, avoiding contact with anyone as best they could. They'd catch a glance from someone now and then, but

most everyone had their own concerns at the moment. The Governor's Mansion was utter chaos.

With Quicksilver able to run through the halls virtually undetected, the Avengers and Beta Ray Bill slowly but surely made their way to the Governor's Office.

Five guards stood guard. One lay dead on the ground.

"Either they killed the loyalist or the sympathizer," Hawkeye remarked.

"Most likely, they killed is a loyalist," Bill whispered. "I'd be surprised if the five at the door were doing more to hold the Governor in than keep Doom out. I imagine Doom has his people at every possible location where he could gain the most advantage."

"I'll take the two on the left, Pietro, you take the three on the right."

Quicksilver nodded and was gone. By the time Hawkeye had a bolo arrow notched, all five guards had fallen.

"I saw no point to wait for you," was all the mutant speedster said.

Hawkeye wanted to rip him for ignoring orders, but if that made Pietro feel better than it was okay with him. He *had* given Pietro the worst assignment* and he was probably dying to get some action. "S'okay, Quicksilver. Saves me an arrow," smiled Hawkeye to Pietro's seemingly permanent frown.

****Going to Ak'yen'ja to gather information***

The four strode to the door and pushed the two large wooden doors open to reveal an ornate office inside. The Governor sat in his chair, facing away from them, seemingly not noticing that someone had entered.

Falcon and Bill shut the doors behind them and the Avengers walked across the plush carpet to stand in front of the Governor's desk.

"Governor, we're here to help," Hawkeye spoke to the back of a chair.

"Oh, really," a shrill female voice replied. "Why do you think the Shi'ar would need the help of the Avengers?" The chair swiveled around and jaws hit the floor. "Welcome to Hollandinia. I've been waiting for you to arrive."

"DEATHBIRD!" Hawkeye screamed.

EARTH - LOS ANGELES

USAgent had been combing the neighborhood for two hours. No one would talk to him. Well, he had to admit, they would talk to him, but they didn't tell him anything. That wasn't true either, he noted sourly, they'd tell him things, but not the things Agent wanted to hear.

He had enough to do with his spare time instead of trying to perform anatomically impossible acts.

Jack was out investigating Michael Proctor, the Councilman he had sent to jail for possession of a controlled substance with intent to sell.* The substance was cocaine. From what he had gathered, the Councilman was selling drugs to finance community projects such as the warehouse he intended to turn into a rec center for the community - the one where Agent had busted him. Getting nothing in Proctor's neighborhood, he hopped on his Harley and headed back to the warehouse.

*** *West Coast Avengers 108***

The Falcon had claimed it was all a set up, but then, the Falcon and Proctor were good friends. One of the Agent's reliable sources had informed him of the drug shipment and Agent took the Whackos to bust him.

But something had been bothering him. What was that news crew doing there? Did they just happen to be in the right place at the right time or were they tipped off, too?

And if they were tipped off, was that necessarily a sign that Proctor was set up?

Proctor was being played by somebody, but was he being framed ... or just used as the fall guy in a larger scheme?

Agent grumbled under his breath. More and more he was certain there was a patsy in all this, and more and more he was certain that the patsy was himself.

THE LATVERIA VIII

Space was alive with the battle of warships.

Dr. Doom was pleased, the battle on Hollandinia was going well. Long had this attack been in preparation, but that was not new to Doom. He was the finest strategist that had ever lived. Long range plans that were complex to others were nothing to him.

He had arranged through his network of allies on Hollandinia to have the majority of the Shi'ar loyalists off-planet. This was the perfect time to attack and the reason why he was certain this was the time to take Hollandinia, despite the setback on Mil'gromal.

Reports from the front said that the Doom troops were gaining control of the planet. Soon, the Doombots from Chambeezer would arrive and seize control of the planet's surface. He could look out his own windows aboard the *Latveria VIII* and tell that the space battle was one-sided as well. Space ships blasted at space ships, but it was Doom's ships that were scoring the most hits and taking the fewest damage.

It was time for Doom to descend to the planet's surface and claim Hollandinia as the crown jewel in his growing Empire. Let the plebeians do the dirty work, Doom would save his entrance for the moment of victory.

He glanced to the Lady Merveille beside him, unconscious in her containment bubble. He'd had to gas her and knock

her out, her constantly prattling had become an annoyance.

Doom would not tolerate annoyances.

A sharp flash of light from the large screen in front of them caused Doom to shield his eyes with his hand. "What is the meaning of this?" he roared.

"New ships just emerged from Hyperspace, Emperor," a nervous tech spoke rapidly. "They appear to be attacking both Shi'ar ships and our ships! Wait - they're hailing us!" Quickly he punched the controlboard in front of him and the large screen changed to a shot of Lord Kofi Whitemane.

"Remember us, Doom?" Kofi smiled gleefully. "Got news for ya, the Avengers saved me!* Now you're going to-!"

**** In West Coast Avengers # 110***

A voice boomed from behind the teen-aged Kymellian. "Kofi, get away from there!"

"Oopsie! Gotta run!" Kofi hit the kill switch and the communications lines were cut.

Dr. Doom fumed. "Get me to the surface."

THE PLANET CHAMBEEZER

Tigra growled in fury. Her plan hadn't worked, not like she wanted it to, at least. The Doombots hadn't been able to recharge, but they hadn't been slowed down much, either. They still functioned, still walked towards a space ship where she could only presume they be employed to help run whatever planet they landed on.

"So," she asked herself, "do I stay here or go with them?"

Growling in anger, Tigra bounded across the lawn, hoping to find some way to get aboard that ship - wherever it was headed.

But she had a pretty good idea.

THE PLANET HOLLANDINIA

Striding through the halls like he already was the building's master, Dr. Doom paid no attention to any of the chaos around him. Whether the distraction was laser fire or the hollering of his supporters, Doom did not care. His armor was vastly superior to anything that could be thrown at it so he had nothing to fear.

Having memorized the blueprints of this facility, Doom took the most direct route to the Governor's offices. He frowned, the guards he had had placed here were missing. Doom frowned beneath his mask. He loathed having his plans changed. It did not bode well for the future of those guards. Doom wished for their own sakes that they were dead because if they lived ... Doom would have words with them.

Confidently, he pushed in the doors to the Governor's office and felt anger wash over him.

Waiting for him, weapons raised, were the Avengers and the sister of the Majestrix Lilandra, Deathbird.

"You seek to lay a trap for Doom?" he asked, feeling his insides coming to a boil.

"Party's over, Doom," Hawkeye spoke, an arrow pointed directly at Doom's chest. "Your dreams of conquest end here."

"My dreams of conquest will never cease, archer," Doom scoffed, folding his arms in front of his chest. "I am Doom. Conquest is my way."

"Such arrogance from one who has lost so many times," Quicksilver shot at Doom. "Perhaps if you turned your own magnificent analytical mind inwards you would discover the reason for your continued failures."

"Words of derision from one who's arrogance matches my own?" Doom chuckled. "So like your father, Maximoff, so willing to try to play for the other side when your own heart tells you it is wrong. You seek to contain yourself when you

should seek to explore your limits. You are nothing Avenger, just like your father." Doom grinned, then turned sour as he looked to Beta Ray Bill. "I see the cyborg is with you. How ... fitting."

Bill said nothing, made no move.

"Ah, he wants not to engage in the frivolities of battle. This pleases me. So far it is only you who have put a hindrance into my plans. But you did not get away without scars, did you?"

"You want to play supervillain cliché # 1," Hawkeye snapped, "and reveal to us your brilliant plan or do you just want us to shove that grim smile up your as-?"

"Does the mouth come with the bow and arrow set, Hawkeye?" Doom asked. "Why is it that every archer I hear of has a mouth that will not cease it's prattling."

"Skill, Doomsie. It's all skill."

"Skill? Or inferiority complex?" Doom grinned, using the stalemate to think of every option available to him. "You seek to stop me here, on this planet inside Shi'ar space and I say that it is a fitting confrontation."

"Why's that?" Hawkeye asked, genuinely, as were the other Avengers, curious.

"Because, archer, this is all your fault," Doom laughed. "All this pain and destruction and joy and creation you have experienced on the planets of Doom can all be traced back to you."

Hawkeye lowered his bow, "How do you figure that?"

Doom grinned, "You are a powerless fool. How long has Doom gone missing?"

"Since we got back from the Franklinverse."

"And why was Doom in the so-called Franklinverse to begin with."

"Cause you entered Onslaught like the rest of us. Jeez, we heard you had amnesia, but this is-

"And why did I enter Onslaught?" Doom's voice boomed.

Pause. "Oh, damn."

"I see your ignorance has finally lifted," Doom accused. "It is because of you, Hawkeye, and your accursed ally Iron Man that Doom entered the Onslaught energy bubble. It is because of your interference that Doom's journey began there and ended here, on the verge of conquering the largest empire in the known universe. Because of *you* , Hawkeye. Our journey has come full circle. Try to stop me. It will be the final act of your pitiful life."

Hawkeye set his teeth. Doom was right, in his own warped way, but he had to shake off the sudden guilt.

Hawkeye raised his arrow and took aim at Doom's chest. Those around him did likewise with their own weapons. "Avengers ... do it."

His arrow was the first weapon to fly.

THE ELITENESS

Admiral Phyken ordered the *Eliteness* out of Hyperspace.

The seven foot tall Shi'ar Admiral, a man who rarely showed shock or surprise, audibly gasped in front of his crew. It was the first time and the last time this crew would ever hear it. In front of him waged a galactic war the likes of which he hadn't ever seen.

Shi'ar warships battled Shi'ar warships in a dramatic maelstrom of explosions and laser fire.

To a loyalist like Phyken, the sight hurt him at the very center of his being.

"A-Admiral, who do we attack?" a crewman asked.

"I ... I do not know."

Laying on the floor, fighting off unconsciousness by holding on to the image of a beautiful gypsy with every breath, Simon Williams stared helplessly across the floor at his left hand. He felt weak, the ionic energy that was slowly seeping out of his body draining him of all reserves.

Wonder Man whimpered on the floor like a baby. Wanda would never love him now.

He was a cripple.

HOLLANDINIA

GOVERNOR'S MANSION

Doom let the assault come and wasn't effected by any of it: Hawkeye's arrows, Deathbird's lances, Quicksilver's speed assault, none of it did any good. The only weapon in the room Doom was wary of was Beta Ray Bill's hammer and the cyborg hadn't thrown it, obviously, to Doom, waiting for a better moment.

The one person in the room Doom wasn't frightened of, the Falcon, played the one card this round that gave Doom pause. As the three attackers stopped, the Falcon walked forward, reaching into his costumes vest.

Doom raised his eyebrows at him.

"I know what you're thinking, Doom," Falcon spoke slowly. "That I can't hurt you. Well, you're wrong."

Falcon removed the Heart of Ak'yen'ja. Doom looked at it curiously, recognizing it instantly. "This has failed once, Avenger, against a foe much superior to you.* Why do you think it shall work this time?"

**** In Fantastic Four # 433, The Latverian Connection, Part Four***

Falcon said nothing as the glow of the ruby wafted off the small gem and enveloped Dr. Doom. Doom did not move, willing to meet any challenge, especially one he had already defeated easily.

He felt his body sucked to the Astral Plane, where his eyes opened wide at who he saw there.

"Hello, Victor. Remember me?"

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

In the Governor's office, the assembled heroes watched on helplessly, unable to discern what was happening, other than that Dr. Doom was covered in a ruby red fog of light.

"Let us attack him while we have the chance!" Deathbird yelled, stepping forward.

"Not a chance, lady," Hawkeye grabbed her arm. "This is how it goes down. You want to defeat Doom, do it out there by rallying your troops."

"This is not our fight, Deathbird," Bill said solemnly, "but our fight is coming. Patience."

"The Ak'yen'jans were very specific about how nothing done to the physical body while the mind was pulled inside the Astral Plane in the Heart would accomplish anything," the Falcon explained, still holding the Heart of Ak'yen'ja in his hand. "The Heart protects all those whose minds walk inside it, they said."

"Bah, they are fools!" Deathbird spat. "They are the lowest of the low of all Shi'ar planets."

"Yeah, well, they'll be Doom's planets if we fail," Hawkeye pointed out.

Deathbird growled low in her throat. "We will have words, someday, Hawkeye."

"Yeah, well, I'll count the days," Hawkeye grumbled. "What's one more psychotic out to kill me?"

OUTSIDE

A large ship landed in the middle of a large green field, in the middle of a large battle between the loyalists and the sympathizers. The loyalists fought with every fiber of their

being, but it was clear that Doom's troops would eventually win the day.

As the hull doors of the ship opened and a battalion of Doombots exited the ships, the loyalists felt their spirits sink. The Doombots marched in sharp regiments as a single unit. They approached steadily, unwavering from their course. They more than halved the distance between the main battle and the landed spacecraft, when a curious thing happened.

The Doombots slowed, stopped and fell over.

The battle stopped, looking back to the spacecraft for explanation.

They were answered as a feline-humanoid bounded from the ship to come and land on the worn out Doombots. "Anybody else up for a good time with Tigra?" she grinned. "Think you've got the stamina to play with me?"

The battle re-exploded. The loyalists fought bravely and though their Empire was not a beloved one by the people of the universe, those loyal to the throne believed with all their hearts that their way was the right way. Despite the lack of numbers, Doom's troops were suddenly failing. To see the Doombots fall ...

When reinforcements for the loyalists came to the planet, the tide was completely in their favor.

If Doom wanted Hollandinia, he'd have to do it himself.

THE HEART OF AK'YEN'JA

"El'kana!"

"Here we meet again, Victor. And here it ends!"

"You are every bit the fool you were when first we met on this plane," Victor spoke confidently in the dreamlike world of the Astral Plane. Red fog floated around them, swirling though there was no air. "I do not know how it is that you are still alive, but you are. So I shall kill you again."

"You can not kill one who is already dead, stranger," El'kana smiled. Her blue figure wafted towards Doom, completely confident is what she must do. "The Heart has many secrets that I was unaware of the last time we met, Victor. It has powers I was not able to tap into because I did not know of their existence."

"Your idol threats mean nothing to Doom."

"Shall we dance again, Victor? The last time I fought for the salvation of my planet, but now ... now that you have taken Ak'yen'ja ... I fight for it's freedom!"

El'kana lunged at Doom, attacking him physically. Doom, accustomed to the real world where he would have nothing to fear from a frontal assault inside his armor did not move. El'kana connected with her feet and sent Doom sprawling backwards. Doom was instantly on his feet, but El'kana's unadorned feet were right there again.

"It is a battle of wills on the Astral Plane, Victor!" El'kana cried as she jumped on the fallen form. She began pounding on the suit of armor with her bare fists, causing dent after dent in Doom's armor.

"Bah!" Doom replied, knocking her off with a single swipe of his arm. "Focus wins on this Plane, El'kana, not hatred. You should have learned that the first time."

"I have!" she screamed as she pushed mentally at Doom. She started with the hatred she felt for the man, the way he came, uninvited to their world and slowly unbalanced the natural order. How he maneuvered the people of the planet to do all of his dirty work for him, pitting friend against friend, brother against brother.*

****See Fantastic Four # 420 - 435 for the complete story***

She pushed with all of this and she could feel Doom squeezed by her mind. Doom was pushing back, however, harder than he had the first time when he defeated her.

Clearly to El'kana, this meant Doom was taking her more seriously, which meant she must be doing something better than she was the first time. She took the confidence and fed on it, using it to draw the hidden reserves of the Heart into the battle.

"What are you doing?" Doom asked, sensing a part of her mind pull away.

"This ruby is called the Heart of Ak'yen'ja, Victor, not the Heart of El'kana!" the Ak'yen'jan woman screamed defiantly. "Come see why it is called what it is called."

Behind her from out of the fog walked the people of Ak'yen'ja.

"Who are they?" Doom asked, not retreating.

"They are all who have gone beyond that love our planet, Victor. Death has left a part of each of them here, in this gem, to protect our world. I did not know of them last time ... but I know of them now."

Doom blasted with his gauntlets at the seemingly unendless supply of people who walked forward, but it did him no good.

El'kana stood back, watching and smiling as Victor von Doom was swallowed whole by the crowd. Ak'yen'ja was avenged.

Finally, at long last, Dr. Doom was defeated.

EPILOGUE ONE - HOLLANDINIA

"Victory is ours!" Deathbird salutes the people of the planet. "We have single-handedly crushed the forces of Doom by the sheer will of the Shi'ar people! Mark well this day, citizens, for any who would seek to overthrow the might of the Shi'ar shall find nothing but pain and death and humiliation."

The crowds roared in victory. Deathbird gave them no indication of how Doom was defeated or that after the Heart

of Ak'yen'ja had released it's grip on him, he had simply vanished away. They did not need to know that.

Behind Deathbird stood a collection of the Shi'ar loyalists who had helped in the battle. Among them was an Admiral named Phyken who couldn't stop shaking. He had seen an image of the man who had caused all of these problems and it chilled him to the core.

Not that long ago, Admiral Phyken had seen Dr. Doom's unconscious body floating freely through space and dismissed it as a piece of floating trash beneath their notice.* The Empire almost took a major loss this day and if it had, it would've been Phyken's fault.

**** Fantastic Four 421***

EPILOGUE TWO - THE LATVERIA VIII

An explosion rocked the Latveria VIII and to Monica Rambeau, it was the moment she had been waiting for. The lights on the bridge powered down for just a nanosecond, but that was all the time she needed to remove herself from the containment bubble.

The crew around her didn't even notice her until she walked up to the man running the communications center and flashed of electric power in front of him.

"Find the Scuttlebutt and get me home," she ordered. The man did as he was told.

EPILOGUE THREE - THE ELITENESS

Wonder Man lied on the floor of the bridge, a constant reminder to the crew what Phyken was capable of. His body was beyond recognizing it's own pain. Most of the crew had gone planetside, leaving only two crewman on the bridge.

As the wall behind him was blown inwards, Simon did not even turn around to see what had caused the commotion. He had a faint recognition of someone disabling the guards, but he didn't really care one way or another. He simply

looked across the way at his hand lying on the floor and wanted to die.

"Wonder Man?" he heard a voice ask.

His eyes looked up at Cannonball.

"Let's get you out of here," the young man spoke softly.

EPILOGUE FOUR - THE LATVERIA VIII

Dr. Doom lay on the floor of his quarters panting like a dog in the mid day sun.

He would not admit, even to himself, that he was hurt. He merely thought about the repairs he would have to do. Struggling to his feet, Doom went to look out his cabin window. The last remnants of battle were being fought, but it was clear that his people would lose this fight.

He wondered what to do next. How best to prepare the assault a second time.

"You should wait," an alluring voice from behind him spoke. Doom made no move of surprise, though he hadn't any idea the woman was standing there. "The time is not yet right for another attempt."

"Do not presume to tell Doom the ways of strategy, wizard," Doom scoffed, turning around to face the woman. "You can not tell me anything I do not already know."

"No, I can not," the woman wizard began, her light blue robes flowing softly around her. "Not about yourself, at least, and certainly not about the ways of war. But I can tell you much about the future. I see you, once again, on your home planet."

Doom waved his hand, "There is nothing for me there but old enemies. Doom seeks new challenges."

"A dark day for the Shi'ar Empire is coming, Victor," the woman continued, keeping her head buried in her robes. "Soon, a rebellion will take place. Already the Kree are planning to regain their foothold of power, a move that will

be enhanced by the actions you yourself have taken on this day. Sit. Wait. Pick up the pieces of the Shi'ar Empire after the coming War. You will still have all you need to conquer Earth."

Doom thought on the words for a moment. "Doom does not like to sit and watch."

"I know, which is why it is imperative you return home."

"Silence your tongue, woman," Doom scoffed. "Do not attempt to tell Doom what to do." Doom walked back to the window. "But still, it has been long since my eyes have taken a long look at my beloved Latveria. I fear that in my absence the world seeks to take advantage of my people. Thanks to your magic I have managed to transport my mind back to Earth on several occasions to check how my land is doing, but the memories of those visits is clouded."

"Indeed, Victor, the distance is great and far and my magic is only so powerful."

Doom thought long and hard. "Perhaps I will return to Earth."

"Yes, Victor, return home and let your hatred for your planet consume you once again. And then, when the time is right, perhaps you shall return to space and finally claim the Shi'ar Empire as your own."

Doom looked out the window, seeing all the power in the spaceships and wanting to control it. "Perhaps, I will, Skydragon. Perhaps Doom shall return."

****What's Skydragon talking about? Why, you're just going to have to tune into the KREE/SHI'AR WAR! MV1's first crossover event! Look for it on the Main Branch and Cosmic Branch!***

EPILOGUE FIVE - THE SCUTTLEBUTT

Hawkeye stood looking at the assembled West Coast Avengers. They were all together and all in one piece- well,

not Wonder Man, Hawkeye frowned. He sat in a chair, saying nothing as Beta Ray Bill's ship instructed them how to reattach his hand. The ship told them that it would be as good as new, but Hawkeye wondered if it would. Unlike most Avengers teams of the past, this version of the Whackos had no real science expert on the roster. There was some science knowledge around, most notably from Tigra, but this wasn't her field.

Tigra, Beta Ray Bill and Lady Merveille were trying, though, and they'd just have to wait and see what happened.

His team had performed well, but the entire episode weighed on Hawkeye. They had gotten themselves stuck between the Shi'ar and Doom, forced to help the Shi'ar stop Doom. The Shi'ar were not much better, if they were at all and Hawkeye had serious doubts about that.

But they had helped and, if nothing else, Deathbird owed them a favor

As the Scuttlebutt traversed through Hyperspace, Hawkeye found himself not really wanting to go back. He found himself hating the Compound and all of it's damnable history. Yes, there had been plenty of good times in the place, but it was also the place that Hawkeye most associated with Mockingbird, his deceased ex-wife.

He sighed, loud enough for Cannonball and Pietro to turn to look at him from opposite sides of the large room.

Clint thought about just what they had accomplished out here as he idly fingered the glowing red ruby in his pocket.

"Well, hey," he thought, bringing a smile to his face, "at least we defeated Doom. We don't have to worry about him invading Earth anytime soon."

EPILOGUE SIX - ONE WEEK LATER - THE PLANET THOMAS X2

News of the defeat of Doom had spread throughout his planets and the Shi'ar had sent ships back in to reclaim the planets as their own.

Admiral Phyken had landed one such assignment and had come to the Planet Thomas X2 only this morning. He had almost put the shame of Doom behind him, almost burying the memory of seeing that iron-clad body floating through space and doing nothing about it. Doom had been defeated and he would soon be purged from the minds of the Shi'ar people.

Phyken had ordered that all of the planet's people be gathered in their town squares to hear his address. He strode to the podium in the capital city. "People of Thomas X2!" he shouted. "The Shi'ar have returned!"

Somewhere, a clock struck high noon.

Phyken was expecting some reaction out of the crowd, but not the one he stood listening to.

It started with one voice and grew as Phyken watched on in horror. What were these people thinking?

A universe that had allowed itself to think itself rid of a problem, shuddered as the winds brought them words they did not want to ever hear again.

Listen closely. Can you hear it? You can, can't you? You can finally hear it.

"... DOOM! ... DOOM! ... DOOM! ... DOOM!! ... DOOM!! ... DOOM!!! ..."

THE END OF WORLD WITHOUT

WEST COAST LINES

Comments c/o mariner2@tiac.net

A three MV1-year journey has ended. Since MV1 started, Dr. Doom has been almost exclusively mine to play with. First in Fantastic Four and now here, in WCA, I've told a lot of Doom stories. And while they

are not fully realized plans, I am happy with what I've got to do. Nice dichotomy, I feel, in having Doom defeated by the collective soul of a people at the same time another people is viewing him as their savior.

Now, Doom is returning home. Unless, of course, the next writer who wants him would like to tell another story of Doom in space before he heads back. But I've left Doom in a position where it will be completely up to the next writer to determine where he is and what he's up to.

I hope I've explained the questions of "How can Doom be in space and on Earth at the same time?" as well. Is it the most sound explanation of all time? No, but it does what it needs to so that it can allow for him to have been on Earth, in the body of a Doombot, while he was really out in Shi'ar space.

This won't be the last we see of Skydragon, either, I hope. Maybe the next writer wants to use her with Doom, maybe s/he doesn't. We'll see, but I've got some things I'd like to do with her in the future.

So my story of Doom in Space ends here for now. Hope you've enjoyed it.

Hey Mark! Well, I know I'm late, but here's my comments on the most recent AWC issues. I really like the team you are slowly assembling. Here's hoping that Beta Ray Bill sticks around, to add some necessary firepower to the team. I can't wait for the Master of Latveria, Dr. Doom, to show up here, seeing as how he is my role model and all. :> Anyway, here are my roster suggestions:

Archangel - Since he was freed up recently, Archangel would fit in great here. I always have liked the guy when he was on the West Coast (remember, he was a Champion!) He'd fit right in here.

War Machine - Jim Rhodes is one of MV1's best characters, with or without armor. He would contribute a lot to this team, even if you just sent him in with a gun or something.

Well, that's it from me. Keep up the great work buddy!

TJB

The first of two letters from TJ this month as I try to catch up. Will Beta Ray Bill stick around? Tune it next issue! <g> As for the other suggestions ... one "no" and one "we'll see", but that's all I can promise. There's plenty of roster moves ahead, though, so you never know who'll show up for a couple issues! And make sure you check out IRON MAN as Ralph Angelo's run of the Golden Avenger begins to see just what's going on with Jim Rhodes these days!

WEST COAST AVENGERS #109

Mark's shifting back into his usual mode now: full-scale epic. Nice to see he's finished his "adjustment period" and ready to rock with "World Without"...

I like the fact that Mark can write the Whackos well without Hawkeye there. Now don't get mad, Lonni - I'm just saying that for so long, the WCA has *been* Hawkeye IMO. It's just nice to see that they can be appealing when Hawkeye's fooling around in the Old West... ;-)>

I'm excited to see the Falcon, even if it's not permanent. He's one of my favorites, and I always enjoy him. Thanks for dusting him off, Mark. And for letting him get a shot in on the Agent. I loved that...

I'm really looking forward to where this story is going. Doom. All RIGHT!! Time to rock n' roll... ;-)>

kell, via the mv1talk list

It's funny to hear someone say that "full-scale epic" is my "usual mode" because way back at the beginning I barely wrote any story that qualified as

an epic and simply marveled at how someone like Van could do a seven part story! It's one of the areas I've improved on as a writer, that's for sure. As for Hawkeye, I think if there's one thing MV1 has shown it's that *any* team can be interesting with *any* combination of characters. I'm thrilled to have the characters I have and thrilled at who's eventually going to stop by. I greatly enjoy writing the Falcon, too, and all I can say is that I plan on writing him for a very long time, but I'm not saying where ... <g>

Hey Mark! Well, you have one official vote of confidence on how you write US Agent. I agreed with everything that he said, so I'm pretty sure that you did a good job portraying someone of his politics. I really like the huge roster that you are preparing, although I hope Jolt sticks around for a while. Seeing Agent mentor her might be fun. Anyway, I also find myself hoping that Doom wins this fight. I like the fact that a man from Earth is challenging the cosmic powers of the Sh'iar Empire. He also seems to be doing it in his usual way, which actually improves some things for the people under his control. That's the kind of ruler Doom is. Anyway, I'm glad to see everyone who is on the roster on this team. My only complaint: I'm not very fond of Monica's new codename. (Another thing I agree with Agent on.) I'd just rather see the team refer to her on a first name basis and let the codename be for public use. Anyway, keep up the great work!

TJB

Thanks, TJ! Whoops, guess Jolt didn't stick around, eh? Sorry, but you can check her out every month over in Randy Lander's New Warriors series.

Planet Chambeezer... YES!

Lady Merveille...? Er, no...

But a nice try. Aw, heck. Maybe it'll grow on me... :)

Anyhow, this was a fun issue. Got to see a *bunch* of characters. Got to see the villany of Doctor Doom. What more can a guy ask?

I'm a bit concerned with the handling of the USAgent. This characterization seems a bit regressive to me, but maybe I'm just being a bit over-protective of someone who was (and may be again- hint hint) a pet character of mine.

Looking forward to the next issue already!

Scooter

Thanks, Scooter. As for Agent, some people seem to like what I'm doing with him and some don't. As I've said plenty of times, I don't like USAgent at all as a character, so I'm definitely interested to see if people think I'm handling him fairly. He's been more enjoyable to write than I thought he would be, but I still can't say I like the character all that much.

Thanks for writing everyone!

NEXT ISSUE: WEST COAST AVENGERS 113

BACK ROOMS

The ramifications of WORLD WITHOUT linger, but do the Whackos even have a Compound to come back home to? Just who was it that Crystal found standing alone in an empty Compound? Will Wonder Man answer the call when Hollywood calls? Agent and the Falcon team up to solve the Case of the Councilman's Cocaine!

Also this month:

HAWKEYE # 16 by Lonni Holland! Check it out for more with the Avenging Archer!

-- Mark ... 11.May.1999

West Coast Avengers 113

JAN. YEAR 4 MV1 Presents ... Earth's Mightiest Heroes!!! AVENGERS



And there came a day when the foes became too great for Earth's Mightiest to handle alone!

On that day was born the West Coast Avengers!

113 NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS # 113

BACK ROOMS

written by Mark Bousquet

THE WEST COAST AVENGERS GATEFOLD

Previously ... The WCA has just returned from space, where they helped stop Dr. Doom from taking a giant step towards his goal of conquering the Shi'ar Empire. On Earth, USAgent has been investigating the case of Councilman Michael Proctor, who he and the WCA had arrested for cocaine possession. Crystal, Bova and Luna arrived at the Compound to find a strange visitor the only occupant.

AVENGERS ROSTER

HAWKEYE - Clint Barton is an expert marksman, sporting a large supply of trick arrows; a former outlaw, he's the WCA's founding Chairman and tied to the WCA more than any other person.

QUICKSILVER - Pietro Maximoff is the twin brother of the Scarlet Witch, son of Magneto, husband to Crystal and father to Luna. He is a mutant possessing the power of acceleration.

LADY MERVEILLE - Monica Rambeau is a former Avengers Chairman, possesses the power to turn her body into any part of the electromagnetic spectrum.

WONDER MAN - Simon Williams became Wonder Man when the Enchantress had his body infused with ionic energy; a strong man with human failings, he struggles to live up to his power

TIGRA - Greer Nelson is a former biologist, changed by the Cat People into a modern version of their greatest warrior of legend

CANNONBALL - Samuel Guthrie has served with the New Mutants, X-Force and the X-Men; came to LA looking for direction and joined with the WCA

USAGENT - John "Jack" Walker started as the Super Patriot and served as a substitute Captain America; has served with both the WCA and Force Works

FALCON - former partner of Captain America and devoted social worker; thanks to his costume, Sam possesses the power of flight - RESERVE

CRYSTAL - a member of the Royal Family of Attilan, wife of Quicksilver and mother of Luna; can command the elemental forces - RESERVE

LIVING LIGHTNING - Miguel Santos is a college student who possesses the power to transform his body into electrical energy - RESERVE

NON ROSTER CAST OF CHARACTERS

BETA RAY BILL - alien cyborg warrior, adopted of Asgard, Bill wields the Mjolnir-level hammer, Storm

Breaker, a gift from Odin

BOVA - the first evolved creature of the High Evolutionary, Bova is an evolved cow that brought Quicksilver into the world; serves as a nanny to Luna

SHAPE - ex of the Squadron Supreme, Shape is a kind-hearted but slow shape changer

LUNA - the young daughter of the mutant Quicksilver and the Inhuman Crystal, Luna is, as far as anyone can tell, simply human

NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS

BACK ROOMS

written by Mark Bousquet

The Avengers arrived home under the light of a full moon.

They walked across the back lawn, Beta Ray Bill's ship Scuttlebutt having deposited them back to their home planet. Hawkeye, Lady Merveille, Quicksilver, Tigra, Wonder Man, Falcon and Beta Ray Bill walked nearly silently across the lawn, enjoying the sound of the Pacific Ocean striking against the shore.

Hawkeye gave his team the once over now that they were back on home turf. Wonder Man was in the worst shape, having lost his hand to some Shi'ar sicko.*

**** That would be Admiral Phyken, as seen in West Coast Avengers # 111***

They had reattached the limb aboard the Scuttlebutt and it appeared to be working properly. Something to do with the ionic energy Simon was made up of - Clint wasn't sure, that science stuff gave him a headache. Simon had complained that he couldn't feel it, but everything looked okay to Clint. Course, he wasn't a scientist, and the Whackos didn't have one. That would be something that he would need to address before long.

Before someone got hurt.

Beta Ray Bill and Cannonball were in the next roughest shape. Bill was seriously injured to the point that Hawkeye wondered how he kept going. He said he was going to rest in the Scuttlebutt, but Clint wouldn't have any of it. He helped the Avengers, the least he could do was recuperate by the ocean. Guthrie, on the other hand, had been drugged pretty good by the Shi'ar* and he was still shaking out the cobwebs. Hawkeye smiled as Tigra volunteered to let him lean on her for the walk back to the Compound's main house.

**** In West Coast Avengers # 111***

Merveille was a little shaken, too. Doom had ripped her body into radio waves and broken her apart.* She'd be fine, just needed a few days to relax. She had said she felt like an AM radio station that just wasn't going to come in until you cleared the other side of the valley - you knew it would come in clear soon, but you would have to wait for it.

**** Again, In West Coast Avengers # 111***

Quicksilver and Falcon both looked to be in good physical shape, but mentally, Clint could tell they were fighting some things. Quicksilver was moody - nothing new - and kept wondering if there was going to be things for him to do. Falcon was another story, however. He was dragging. Clint had asked him what was wrong, but all he answered was, "Just thinking." He stopped walking for a moment and turned to look at Clint, "I've got to go talk to Michael."

The Falcon took to the air before Hawkeye had a chance to say anything else. He was about to decide if he should get mad or let it go when his thoughts were interrupted.

"Clint?"

"Yeah?" he answered to Merveille, turning back around to face her. "What's up? Hoping for tomorrow off?" he grinned.

"No," Monica answered seriously, "but I was wondering why every light in the Compound is out."

Hawkeye blinked. She was right. With all that had happened and the full moon above them bathing everything in light, he just hadn't noticed that there wasn't any lights on inside the main house. "Wonderful, he muttered."

"I'll go check it out," Merveille offered and Clint nodded his acceptance. She blinked out, streaking into the Compound before any of the other Avengers noticed she was gone. To his left he could hear Pietro mutter, "We don't even need a speedster on this team when we've got her." He'd have to talk to him later on.

The door swung open after a few moments and a shaken Monica opened the door. When the Avengers reached the door - all with strange looks upon their faces - Merveille just motioned for them to come inside. "No one turn on any lights," she ordered. The Avengers entered the Compound's main house on edge. They were sufficiently tired and angry enough, they weren't in the mood for parlor games.

"Crystal?" Pietro asked to the darkness.

"It is I, husband," Crystal says softly from across the way. "No, please, do not come to me, Pietro. I am in no danger and I have not been harmed. The same can not be said of the person sitting next to me. Please control yourselves, Avengers, the sight you are to see is ... unkind. Merveille?"

Monica Rambeau slowly brought up the main house's lights.

The Avengers gasped - some inwardly and some, to their shame, outwardly. Sitting on the couch was a monster of dark green metal that looked like a playdoh representation of a child's nightmare. The form was human in it's base, but it's features were caricatures. The left arm was not an arm, but rather a grotesque version of Captain America's shield. The chest plate was reminiscent of Iron Man, but made for a woman and not a man. The right arm was huge and muscular and it held a metallic rendition of Thor's hammer

Mjolnir. At the waist was a metallic version of Ms. Marvel's waist sash. The left leg looked like a sculpture of the Beast's furry form and the right was unmistakably the Scarlet Witch's. The face was warped and massive, but it clearly belonged to only one person.

"Avengers," Crystal began, her eyes sore and red from crying, "look what we've done to ... Jocasta."

Los Angeles County Jail

Somewhere in the city of Angels, a man shifts uncomfortably on his small bed.

The man is Michael Proctor, a city Councilman who was arrested the week previous by the West Coast Avengers for possession of a controlled substance with intent to sell.* The substance was cocaine, but he swore to the USAgent-led Avengers - and to anyone who would listen - that he didn't know why the cocaine was sitting in a warehouse he was planning on turning into a rec center funded by his community outreach program, Helping Hands.

**** In West Coast Avengers 108 - You thought I was going to say WCA 111, didn't you?***

He had no windows in his cell and had only a few visitors since being brought here. Fewer as the days went on as all the political "friends" of his made sure to stop by to be seen by the cameras and once that was accomplished they had no further use for Michael Proctor. Some hadn't even bothered to come in and talk to him. They walked in the front door, sat down for a half hour and then left, proclaiming Proctor to be "in good spirits".

There were few protestors outside. The world had become so jaded that the arrest of a supposedly innocent politician barely made a blip.

There were other stories to obsess over.

A burly guard came over to Proctor's cell and rapped on the bars. "Let's go, Councilman, you've got a visitor. An almost celebrity, even."

Proctor cringed as the guard led him down the long hallway. He hoped it wasn't some out-of-control young actor looking to get himself some pub for playing good citizen. He hated Hollywood actors almost across the board, but they were good to use to get some money for the community.

He was led into the visitor's room where he sat down across from his visitor, separated by a clear bullet-proof piece of glass. Proctor had to wait a moment while his visitor was brought to him.

It was the Falcon. Proctor cringed for his friend at the verbal assaults thrown at him by the other inmates who watched him pass by.

The Falcon sat down. "Hello, Michael."

"Hello, Sam."

The two old friends sat and looked at each other for a moment, each aware that the true distance between them at this moment wasn't the two feet from face to face, but the distance of the inch of bullet-proof glass that separated those allowed to walk in society and those who weren't.

"Sorry about the catcalls just now."

"Don't sweat it," the Falcon answered. "I didn't need to come in this costume."

"Why did you?" Michael asked, allowing himself to think, just for a second, that maybe one of his oldest friends was using him to.

"Long story," the Falcon answered. "It's the same reason it took me so long to come see you.* I'll tell you about it when we get you out of here."

*** *A little something called WORLD WITHOUT got in the way! -- von Biscuit***

Michael sighed heavily. "And if you don't get me out of here?"

The Falcon didn't answer.

AVENGERS COMPOUND

Hawkeye had a sinking feeling in his stomach because he knew, to some extent that the condition Jocasta was in was his fault.

"I ... I don't remember everything," Jocasta was saying, her cold, hollow, mechanical voice somehow sympathetic. "I remember fighting ... fighting the New Warriors on the moon of all places.* I don't know how I got there or how ... how I had become the Super Adaptoid." She shook her monstrous head. "I remember fighting them, but I don't even remember being Jocasta ... if that makes any sense."

**** In Avengers 408***

Crystal hadn't left her position on the couch next to Jocasta, but the other Avengers had filtered in around them. Some taking seats, some standing, all their attentions kept rapt by the sight before them. Pietro stood behind his wife, his hands resting on her shoulders. Luna was sleeping in one of the bungalows outside with Bova, but he had demanded that they come inside the main house to sleep. He felt naked with them outside.

Jocasta continued, "I was defeating the Warriors rather easily when ... when the Avengers showed up and joined the battle.* I remember collecting all the data on them and then, when my chances of success were at their lowest, I left for Earth."

**** In Avengers 409***

Hawkeye closed his eyes, remembering the battle. He had been there on the moon - they hadn't been given any indication at all that the Super Adaptoid was really Jocasta. None at all.

"I didn't know why I went where I went," Jocasta continued, her voice lowering enough to cause Wonder Man, who was standing the farthest away, to have to strain to hear it. "I just knew that I had ... I had to go to the exact place I went. I ... remember walking through a door and seeing ... the Vision ... strapped to a table and suddenly it all became clear. I wasn't the Super Adaptoid. I was Jocasta. And once again, I was Ultron's slave."*

*** *Avengers 411***

Wonder Man found himself ashamed. How could he sit here and complain about his hand as he looked at the grotesque form of Jocasta? Yes, his hand had been cut off, but it had also been repaired, thanks to Beta Ray Bill's ship, the Scuttlebutt and the assistance of several of his teammates, who had worked hours to reattach the limb. But Jocasta ... Simon cringed, feeling the pangs of guilt wash over him.

"Together ... Ultron and I fought the Avengers," Jocasta said, and the Avengers wondered if she just might cry. Beside her, Crystal, again, was weeping. "Worse, we were winning."*

*** *Avengers 412***

Hawkeye shifted uncontrollably. When Ultron had shown to them that the Adaptoid was also Jocasta, they had all figured it to be a new Jocasta because the Adaptoid/Jocasta hadn't given them any indication that it was anything but a new creation.

"Then Thor arrived. I battled him mightily because I knew he was the greatest threat to Ultron," Jocasta pleaded, seemingly begging for forgiveness. "We ... battled long, but Thor was too much for me. I do not know exactly what happened next."

"Ultron fell," Simon interjected, rubbing the place on his left hand where the Grellian assassin wire had sliced

through. "We defeated him and I sent him hurtling through space. It was right after I had returned to life.* As for Ultron's body ... that's another story," Simon shook his head. "You won't believe it."**

*** *In Avengers 413***

**** *See Avengers 429 - 431 for the Spaceknight Saga - Can you say cross promotion?***

"And you remained in the laboratory Ultron had used as his base, forgotten," Hawkeye added sourly. "We had checked the place, but we didn't see anything. Not that we looked all that hard."

"When I awakened, my body was laying on the ground, broken into pieces," Jocasta added, picking her head up, her voice gaining emotion. "When Thor defeated me, my body had exploded. You wouldn't have found anything no matter how hard you looked."

"What happened next, Jocasta?" Lady Merveille added. "How did you get to where you are now?"

Jocasta closed her eyes and a soft humming could be heard. Her computer units were attempting to access that information. "I came to shortly afterwards, but it took me weeks, if not months, to reassemble myself. With the ... Adaptoid powers I had, I could transmorph myself back together but ... my ... my head hurts and I couldn't make myself one shape again. I concentrated but I could only get what ..." her head bowed low and her voice was barely audible, "... I could only get what you see before you. I ... I came here to ... to hope that ..." Jocasta's mechanical voice cracked and a tear could clearly be seen running out of her red ionic eyes and down her green metallic face.

Crystal spoke for her, "She came here for help."

OUTSIDE THE LA COUNTY JAIL

The Falcon exited the jail, wondering exactly what he was going to do next.

He didn't have long to wonder.

"Been waiting for you, Falcon," a voice from the darkness came to him.

Sam spun, taking into the sky as a defense measure. "Agent! What are you doing here? Digging for more dirt?"

"Yes, I am, as a matter of fact," Agent explained. "Thing is, you're going to help me from here on out."

"Like hell," the Falcon answered, coming back to the ground.

"Look, Falcon," Agent snapped, "frankly I don't care if you like me or not. Frankly, I don't like you. At all. But the Proctor case needs to be resolved, one way or another."

"Michael is innocent," Sam answered without pause.

"Look, bird-boy," Agent stepped in close to get in the Falcon's chest, "if you're going to go after this just looking to find him innocent, then I have to go into this looking to find him guilty. I don't want to do that, but I'm not going to allow you to taint evidence."

"Taint evidence?" the Falcon asked in surprise. "That's the last thing I would do - or need to do since Michael is innocent."

Agent stepped back and started to walk away. "He just may be. Want to help me prove it?"

The Falcon watched Agent's back walk away, deep in thought. He had intended to do this alone, but if Agent was at least willing to consider that Michael was innocent ...

"Wait up, Agent. I'll help. Where are we going first?"

"To pay a visit to the tv station that covered the arrest. I want to know who tipped them off." Agent paused and

looked back at the Falcon. "I want to see if it was the same person who called me."

AVENGERS COMPOUND

Avengers Compound was active, but quiet as the team went about the process of unwinding after the long days in space. They all had their own concerns, their own thoughts, their own ways of getting back to normal. Lady Merveille, for instance, streaked into the night time sky, headed to her home in New Orleans, while others took solace in each other.

THE BUNGALOW OF PIETRO and CRYSTAL

Pietro and Crystal stood outside their bungalow enjoying the cool night air, their arms wrapped around the others. They peered inside the window of the bungalow to see Bova putting their daughter Luna to bed. Crystal hadn't asked anything more than a simple "How are you?" to her husband, not really wanting to know about what had happened. He had returned to her - that was enough.

"You discovered Jocasta then?" Pietro asked.

"Yes, she was here when Bova, Luna and I arrived," Crystal answered, taking a moment to brush the hair out of her eyes.

"Where was USAgent? Jolt? Shape? Living Lightning?"

"Gone. I used the com center to contact Agent with his communicard. He said Jolt was still around when he left."

"It makes us look like amateurs," Pietro scoffed. "Where did Jolt run off to?"

"Hawkeye's checking it out now," Crystal shrugged, pulling Pietro closer to her. "But let's not talk about that. Let's talk about how wonderful it will be here."

"Eh?" Pietro asked. "You sound glad to be here. That is not the way you felt before we left." *

**** See Marvel Triple Action 48 for a Quicksilver and Crystal story - Sir Biscuit of Wundagore***

"I am glad to be here now that I am. Seeing Jocasta in all that pain and coming for help ... it feels like we're amongst family again. Maybe the only family we will ever truly know together." Crystal felt a shiver run through her. "By all that is holy, did you see the pain she was in?"

Pietro frowned above his wife's head. How could he tell her that with all the non-use he had gotten against Dr. Doom, he was beginning to wonder if this was really the place for him at all.

SUPER CHANNEL NETWORK - LOS ANGELES OFFICES

The Falcon and USAgent entered the offices of the Los Angeles branch of the Super Channel Network, taking their frustrations out on the front doors. The offices were small, just a single floor of a high-rise office building.

The floor was mostly empty this time of night, only a handful of the network's skeletal crew was present and Jack and Sam walked directly over to the oldest looking person in the room.

"Can I help you?" he asked through a burning cigarette, nonplussed by the appearance of two Avengers.

"We want to know everything you've got on the Proctor case," Agent said sharply. "Including who tipped you off."

"Listen here, tough guy," the producer shot back, "I don't have to tell you a damn thing. That source is confidential."

Agent and the Falcon looked at each other and nodded, this is what they expected. "What about if we traded some information?" the Falcon offered. "You don't even have to tell us who tipped you off, just confirm our suspicions."

"Depends," the producer, the name plate on his cubicle read Jeff Relgah, scratched his grey hair, "what are you offering?"

Agent leaned in close, "An exclusive interview on why ..."
Falcon couldn't hear what Agent said, and frankly, didn't care. Jack had said he had bait for them to use and Falcon was willing to go along with Agent's play. If it wasn't good enough for this Relgah fellow ... Falcon would find something else he wanted.

His friend's life was on the line.

THE BUNGALOW OF CANNONBALL

Sam Guthrie sat on his bed, tired and still groggy from whatever drugs the Shi'ar had pumped into his system. He felt like he did when he had a bad head cold - the world seemed to go a couple beats too fast and he was always trying to catch up. He wanted to sleep forever, or take a hot shower forever, or curl up with T- anything to relax, his defensive mind filled in. God knew watching television wasn't working.

"Hey!" he jumped, feeling a surge of energy go through him.

"Playing hard to get?" Sam spun on his heels to see Tigra and his world spun out of control. His body slumped forward onto the floor and Greer immediately went to his side, all playfulness gone. "You okay, Sam?" she asked as she helped him slump into a more comfortable position.

"My head ..." he grabbed his head, feeling each individual THUMP of his heartbeat reverberate around inside of him. Somehow through the noise, the television cut through.

" ... and in the daily MUTANT: Menace or Next Fashion Trend? File, the outlaw band of mutants-"

"Aren't they all outlaw bands?"

"Easy Ms. Thornston, you're stepping on my lines."

"Ha! Sorry, Craig! Not!"

"Did you just use a 'Not' joke?"

"I think I did."

"We'll talk later ... the outlaw band of mutants named X-Force - what, do all mutant groups buy their names from the same discount store? Hey, look at us, we're the X-People! We're outlaws! - were captured live and on tape in front of an outside studio audience battling the allegedly alien race called the Phalanx in Nebraska yesterday."*

**** See X-FORCE # 71 - 73 at the Four Corners Branch - X-Biscuit ...***

"Huh? Phalanx? Tab?" Sam jerked his head up, causing the room to resume it's spinning. "Phalanx and Tab ... gotta help ... gotta get to her ... gotta ... Tab ... I miss you so much ..."

"Easy, Kentucky, looks like they saved the day," Tigra assured him as a cold fever began to rack his body. Within seconds, he was asleep.

Tigra sighed to herself, it looked like it would be another night alone. It gave her plenty of time to wonder just who this Tab person was.

OUTSIDE THE SCN OFFICES

"I knew it!" Agent spat, slamming his fist into his other hand. "Same guy makes two calls - one to me and one to the tv station."

"But Relgah said that the call came from a woman," the Falcon puzzled as the elevator lowered them to the ground.

"Yeah, I know, but that's how this contact works," Agent explained. "With me, it's a person-to-person call, but with the media and other politicians, he uses his secretary or an intern. Something to make it look like information is being leaked, so they trust it more."

The Falcon studied the frown on Agent's brow. It was clear he was bothered by the whole incident, but whether or not he thought that Michael was innocent was another story. "This contact of yours ... he's government connected, right?"

Are we talking SHIELD? The Commission? Military? Politician? Who?"

Agent shook his head, "I can't tell you that, Sam. I can't betray that trust he's shown in me."

"But he may have been using you!" The Falcon couldn't believe what Agent was saying.

"Doesn't mean your friend isn't guilty," Agent shrugged. "I can tell you this about my contact, there are people in power who saw that arrest and knew that he was responsible for it. People who he could want to impress."

"Enough to send an innocent man to jail?"

"No," Agent said flatly, staring Falcon in the eyes. He held it for a second and then turned away. "At least, I don't think so. But I'm telling you, Sam, there's something about this whole thing that bothers the heck out of me."

THE BUNGALOW OF WONDER MAN

Simon Williams could not stop grabbing at his left hand. He didn't care that it had been reattached, an apparent gift of his ionic energy and he didn't care that it didn't hurt him and he didn't care that it worked as good as it always did.

It bothered him that it had happened at all.

He rubbed his wrist, where the slice had happened, harder and harder. Something wasn't right about the whole situation. Or maybe, he wondered, thinking about his inability to get over Wanda, something wasn't right with him.

He rose, deciding to take a shower. He was five feet across the room when his world went dark.

Wonder Man fell to the floor unconscious.

OFFICES OF THE LOS ANGELES DISTRICT ATTORNEY

"Yeah, we've had a phone tap on Helping Hands for awhile now."

Agent and Falcon were in the offices of LA District Attorney Janet Phimmersby, listening to her tell them about the case against Michael Proctor. She was an attractive woman in her early thirties with strawberry-blond hair that flowed naturally about her face. 'LA,' the Falcon thought. 'Where everyone looks like a movie star.'

"Have you had Mic- Councilman Proctor under surveillance as well?" the Falcon asked.

"Not beyond how it relates to the organization, no," Ms. Phimmersby answered.

"You don't think tapping the phones of Helping Hands is a bit ..."

"Racist?" Janet finished for the Falcon. "Not at all. A new charity starts up and instantly starts spreading a great deal of cash around is going to draw attention to itself. The fact that they employ ex-gang members naturally brought them to our attention.

"Nothing like giving a person the benefit of the doubt, huh?" Falcon asked pointedly, feeling his anger grow.

Phimmersby didn't miss a beat. "If it turned out that Helping Hands was a front for criminal activities and we knew who was in their employ and didn't do anything, what kind of public outrage do you think would be thrown at this office, Falcon? I'd rather take the fall on the side of public safety than negligence."

Falcon responded angrily, "This is the kind of attitude that-

"Stow it, Falcon," Agent stepped in, catching the Falcon's eye. "You and Ms. Phimmersby can debate social politics at the Policeman's Ball. We're here to solve this case." Jack turned back to Janet. "What has your investigation dug up?"

The District Attorney shifted in her chair. "I probably shouldn't, but ..." she eyed the Falcon, weighing her options.

"Helping Hands received a phone call from the warehouse on the night in question. Councilman Proctor was not involved in the conversation."

"See, he must be innocent." Agent and Phimmersby both looked at Falcon, who shrugged. "Sorry."

"Five minutes after the call was received at Helping Hands, Proctor drove to the warehouse, where he was apprehended by the USAgent and the West Coast Avengers."

"How did all that coke get there?" Agent asked, his turn to try to poke holes in the DA's case. "A shipment that big must have caught the attention of someone."

"No one's talking, if they have. Something, I think, you've noticed about that neighborhood."

Agent nodded. The three of them looked at each other for a moment, sizing up the situation and the players involved.

"Is that it?" the Falcon asked, hopeful that this case would be thrown out of court if this was all they had.

Janet frowned. "Unfortunately, yes."

"That won't hold up in court," Agent answered. "Probably should, though. No, don't look at me like that, Falcon. He owns the building that a large supply of cocaine was found in and, beyond that, we found him in the building with the cocaine minutes after a phone call was sent to Helping Hands informing them of the shipment. You haven't been able to find anyone that will admit to dealing with Proctor for the drugs?"

Janet shook her head. "But that's why heads of criminal organizations have lackeys."

The Falcon was about to defend his long-time friend, when Ms. Phimmersby's door burst in and an overweight clerk stepped in, "Ms. Phimmersby! We just got word that- oh, I didn't know that you had company."

"It's okay, Charles," Janet nodded. "What is it?"

"LAPD just phoned in. They arrested someone in connection to the Proctor case."

"What's the charge?" Janet asked, already on her feet and fitting into her coat.

"Don't know," Charles huffed. "But this could be our lucky break. We go to the grand jury tomorrow, after all and we don't really have much of a case against the Council."

"That'll be enough, Charles," Janet sighed, looking at the two Avengers present. "Well, boys, want to go for a ride?"

Agent and Falcon nodded.

COMPOUND MED-LAB

Hawkeye cracked his back, groaning like the old man he swore he'd never be.

He'd sent the Avengers off to relax and recuperate after listening to Jocasta's story, but for him, there'd be no relaxation for awhile. Such was the life of the Avengers Chairman. Beta Ray Bill and Jocasta were both resting in the Med-Lab. Bill was resting comfortably and wouldn't admit he was in a great deal of pain, but he clearly was and clearly needed the rest.

Jocasta was in poor shape to look at, but she appeared to be okay mentally. As okay as a computer can be mentally, Hawkeye thought, after it had been completely shut down.

She really was a sight to look at. Hawkeye shook his head, he couldn't shake the feeling that what she really looked like was a five year old's rendition of the Super Adaptoid. Everything was all out of proportion and all over the place, but it appeared to be coming more together. The arm that was basically Cap's shield and nothing else looked like it was trying to become a human shaped arm again.

"How ya' hanging in there, Jocasta?" he asked.

"Good, I suppose," Jocasta shrugged, a Herculean effort given her form. "I just ... I don't ..."

"Hey now," Hawkeye spoke up, moving to sit next to her on the laboratory bench. He rested a hand on her upper thigh, the one that looked like the Scarlet Witch. "We'll fix you up, don't worry."

Jocasta looked at Hawkeye and smiled, "Thank you."

Hawkeye looked into her ionic eyes and wondered if he had told her the truth. They needed help, scientific help, and there wasn't much on the roster. He'd put in a call to the East Coast branch later on and see if they had any thoughts.

Looking at the grotesque form of Jocasta, a person the Avengers hadn't treated as well as they should have in the past, he certainly wished they would have some ideas.

"Jocasta, I hate to leave you, but-"

"But you have to look for Jolt and Shape, yes, I know," Jocasta answered, her mouth twisting unnaturally. "It is okay. Here, this is all that I found when I arrived."

She handed Hawkeye a note that was written in Shape's scribbled hand-writing. "JOLT LEVE. LUKING ZOLA. SHAPE FOLLO."

"Luking Zola?" Hawkeye asked. "As in Arnim?"

"That would be my guess," Jocasta added then dropped her head immediately as Hawkeye's head snapped to look at her. "If my guess means anything."

Hawkeye leaned in closer to her and put his arm around her shoulder as best he could, causing the synthezoid to look at him with a hopeful look on her face. "Of course it means something, Jocasta." He paused, wondering if he should add anything.

Jocasta nodded, closed her eyes and allowed her head to lean into Hawkeye for support. "I hurt so much, Hawkeye. I

hurt so very much."

LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT

"Bite me, jack off!"

"Cute language." Agent stood with Phimmserby, Falcon and an LA detective named Lopf behind a two way mirror, watching the interrogation of Paul Proctor, Michael's younger brother.

"Just what do you know about the Proctors, Falcon?" Detective Lopf asked. Lopf was an old and tired detective. Falcon guess he was probably divorced, lived alone and had a million war stories to tell if you gave him his favorite brand of alcohol. He just looked like the stereotypical burnt out cop.

"We grew up in the same neighborhood together," Sam spoke slowly, knowing that a mind looking for guilt will latch onto anything as evidence. "We've never been very close, though there was always a kind of bond between Michael and myself. We shared the same interests, had the same goals. We've worked a lot of community programs together. He moved out to LA about five years back or so, when Paul went to jail. Said he needed a new start."

"What about Paul?"

Sam sighed. "I thought Paul was still in jail, to be honest with you. Unlike Michael, who's always strived to better himself and help others, Paul was always looking to get ahead as quick as he could." Falcon sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. The ordeal in space was starting to really affect him. He needed food and sleep. "When he was fifteen, Michael and I caught him selling speed to college kids at Empire State. By the end of our ... talk with him, he was crying like the baby he was, blaming it all on his parents who, he claimed, gave all their love to Mike and none to him."

"Of course you reported that incident to the local authorities," Janet prodded.

"Save it, Phimmersby," Agent cut in, defending his teammate.

"Let me go in and talk to him," Falcon sighed. Detective Lopf nodded, rapping on the glass so the detective inside would know someone was coming in. Agent, Phimmersby and Lopf watched Falcon exit the room they were in and reappear inside the interrogation room a moment later. Paul Proctor grinned as he heard the door open, figuring he had worn the cop out and it was time to get cracking on the replacement.

His jaw hit the floor when he saw the Falcon enter the room.

"Hello, Paul. Time to come clean."

THE NEXT MORNING

AVENGERS COMPOUND

Dawn rose on the city of Angels and the Avengers stumbled out of bed, their bodies thankful for the full night of recovery.

Hawkeye made his way to the main living room where he found Pietro, Jack and Cannonball watching television.

"Ah'm telling you, nothing happened!" Cannonball pleaded.

"Of course not," Quicksilver scoffed.

"Why would we think anything happened?" Agent scoffed.

"What's up?" Clint asked.

"Cannonball and Tigra ... spent the night together," Pietro scolded.

"Hawkeye, Clint, nothing happened. Ah passed out and woke up and she was there, sleeping on the foot of mah

bed, but nothing happened, ah swear it." Cannonball looked desperate and Clint couldn't help but smile.

"Whatever you say, Sam."

"Gah!"

"Where's everyone else?" he asked, trying to change the subject to protect Guthrie. "Any word from Jolt or Shape?"

"Nothing. As for the rest, Crystal, Bova and Luna are in our bungalow," Pietro informed the Chairman. "Merveille hasn't reported back yet, Tigra is ..." Clint grinned as Pietro's face curled up in disgust, "... sleeping ... in Cannonball's bungalow and I haven't seen Wonder Man, yet. Jocasta and Beta Ray Bill are still in the med-lab."

"Falcon on monitor duty?"

"Nope," Jack answered, sipping on his coffee. "He's on the tv."

They all turned to see the Falcon exiting the Los Angeles County Jail with Councilman Michael Proctor.

"In surprising developments," Carla Gregory, the Super Channel Network's Los Angeles correspondent, reported in the foreground, "all charges against Michael Proctor have been dropped by the LA District Attorney's office. You may remember Councilman Proctor being arrested late last week by the West Coast Avengers in an illegal raid of a Helping Hands warehouse. Late last night, SCN has learned, an arrest was made on Paul Proctor, Michael's brother who, after a lengthy interrogation in which he repeated several times that he did not want a lawyer present for, copped to the charges against his older brother. According to sources close to the case, Paul admitted that he had been using Helping Hands as a front to distribute drugs throughout the neighborhood. He was adamant that no money donated to Helping Hands was used in the purchase of drugs and no money collected was funneled into Helping Hands. In an apparently tear filled confession, Paul begged forgiveness,

claiming that he couldn't help himself when he took advantage of his brother's generosity for a new chance at a clean life.

"To repeat, all charges against the Councilman have been dropped. In a series of statements just released to the media, the LA DA's office apologized to the Councilman, but warned that the actions of any employee or volunteer of Helping Hands effects the entire operation. The Councilman's lawyer told me, in and SCN exclusive, that Proctor would not seek any damages against the city of Los Angeles, but rather use this as a time for everyone to come together and start to work toward a better future. One last statement issued by the spokesman for the West Coast Avengers issued an apology to the Councilman, but defended the legal system of the United States and reminded us that everyone is innocent until proven guilty."

"We have a spokesperson?" Clint asked quizzically.

"Falcon and I did that," Agent replied, waving it off. "Something needed to be said."

"I'm the one who should be issuing statements, Jack," Clint spoke angrily. "You've got to watch yourself. First you grab hold of the Avengers to arrest Proctor and now this? We've got rules and procedures to follow here."

Jack didn't look at Hawkeye as he sipped some more on his coffee. "Why don't you keep it down, Clint and listen to what Ms. Gregory has to say? I think that will be sufficient to bring your blood back down from boiling level."

"... and in another SCN exclusive," Carla continued, "stay tuned for a special edition of AVENGERS SPOTLIGHT tonight as I go one-on-one with USAgent where we'll learn why he's quitting the West Coast Avengers."

Hawkeye exploded out of his chair. "What?!?"

EPILOGUE

INFANTINO OFFICE TOWER

Councilman Michael Proctor entered an elevator in the high rise office building and pressed the button that would take him to the second to last floor. He hummed quietly to himself, glad to be out of jail and back in circulation. Helping Hands had suffered some blows from the charges made against him, but the guilt money that poured in today from his friends in the entertainment business more than made up for whatever funds were lost.

All things considered, he thought it was a pretty good day.

It was unfortunate about Paul, but, Michael knew, they had given him plenty of chances and he kept letting them down. Better him to fall than the entire organization.

The elevator reached the selected floor, but the doors did not open. Quickly and quietly, Proctor reached down and pressed a series of buttons in quick succession. The elevator doors swooshed open.

He exited into a small walkway tunnel where he knew he was being scanned and exited through the other side into a small room. The room contained nothing but doors, marked from number 2 through number 9. Without hesitation, he walked to door number 7, opened it and stepped inside a room that was roughly the size of four telephone booths. He removed his jacket and adorned the red robe that was waiting for him. His heart skipped a beat, adrenaline rushing through him as he pulled on the red mask.

He exited the changing room and entered a large, luxurious room that was centered a long wooden oval table. The room was filled with other similarly dressed red robed figures, all with white numbers on their foreheads.

The number on Michael's mask was number 7.

He took his seat at the table, grumbling erupting from the other members in the room.

"We have missed you, Number 7," Number 1 spoke with the confidence of one who knows his rule is unquestioned.

"My apologies, Number 1," Michael/Number 7 answered, knowing that Number 1 was the only person in the room that knew who he was under the red hood. He was the only person in the room who knew who anybody in the room was. "I trust you managed fine without me."

"That we did," Number 1's voice rose as he stood from the table. "After all, we are ... the Secret Empire!"

END WEST COAST AVENGERS 113

WEST COAST LINES

Comments c/o mariner2@tiac.net

Hey, hey, Jocasta's back! Van's Adaptoid/Jocasta interpretation was just sitting there, waiting to be picked up on so I figured I'd grab her and run with it. She provides a great platform to work things off of and I'm looking forward to seeing what you think of her, since she has these new Ultron-given powers of the Super Adaptoid. I've got plenty of things lined up for her which I hope you'll enjoy.

As for Agent, yes, it's true, Jack is on his way out. I don't like the character much at all, so I was pleased that some of you who do like Jack liked the way I handled him. I've had more fun writing him than I thought I would, but honestly, this Councilman story was the only one I had. And since other writers here at MV1 do have stories to tell with Jack, it seems selfish of me to keep him here. So my apologies to those who won't be pleased with Agent leaving (sorry TJ and Scooter!), but rest assured he'll be playing an important role in another MV1 title - and possibly a second - very soon. Find out just why he's leaving next issue.

As for the series, now that WORLD WITHOUT is over, I can get back to really concentrating on these characters.

On to the letters ...

Dear Mark, nice work. Ok I have suggestions 1) Tigra should get a little more courage. She should not be like the cowardly lion from The Wizard of Oz. I think you should add to her abilities. Make her like Talon in The Guardians of the Galaxy give her the ability to shoot her nails and instantly reload. That would be cool. Don't make her a vixen/sexaholic. please!! Can you make her go back to her old job a Biologist. Everyone overlooks her genius and makes her a ...well, er... slut. 2) Keep the team simple!!!! lose Shape, Jolt, Cannonball, and Variable. Keep Tigra, Hawkeye, Wonder Man, U.S. Agent, and Lady Merveille. (And change Lady Merveille to Lady Marvel). Add 1 or 2 former Avengers. But keep the roster sturdy and reliable. She-Hulk and Eros(Starfox) would be good Avengers. Well, that's all and great job!!!!

Smed

Thanks for the letter, Smed. As for your concerns ... 1) Tigra will not be shooting her nails anytime soon. Sorry. As for Tigra's "sluttiness", she's a woman who enjoys sex. She also uses it as a crutch at times. But it is an integral part of her character and I can't ignore it without removing her "cat" persona. And I don't intend to do that. 2) I fear this cast will never be simple. <g> I think I've got a good mix of former Avengers here and I intend to keep a core line-up while rotating some characters in and out. But the roster will stay in flux, just not in the "Old Order Changeth" styled stories.

On Issue 111

Again, a phenomenal job with the latest issue. As though I expected less. A couple of questions, though...

1) Shouldn't Cannonball be a little more proactive here? I mean, granted, he's a bit nervous about being here and all, but he was an X-character - an X-Man for a short time, even. Given his history and the fact that he was always a fairly responsible student, he should know the Shi'ar Imperium, or at least a little of their culture.

2) Bill's attitude confuses me a little. I mean, he's not the friendliest of horse-faced adopted Asgardians, no, but... he seems a bit curt, and short-tempered here.

3) Do I detect a bit of potential romance between Jolt and Miguel? Hmm...

4) speaking of Jolt... one wonders why she wants to be an Avenger so badly. Frankly, by now, I'm amazed she hasn't just walked away.

-Shawn-

Thanks for the letter, Shawn! To get right to your questions:

1) I think Sam was still feeling his way a little, content to play off Wonder Man's lead for a bit, given Simon's recent personality woes. I think will make an excellent leader some day and part of being a leader is knowing when to be proactive and when to lay back.

2) Bill's curtness was to underline the seriousness of the situation. He's tired, he's been fighting warships, he's been hurled into the Earth ... he wants everyone to stay locked in on the mission at hand.

3) Harmless flirting is all. For now, anyway ...

4) Well, that's what she did. <g> I think Jolt's a character that has a chip on her shoulder and her "problem" isn't that she wants to be an Avenger, but

rather that she wants to be wanted. When Miguel was talking to her on the couch, she felt better than she had at any other time, but I think what drives Hallie is that she wants to be a hero. She wants to do all she can and being an Avenger would help to accomplish that.

Mark, I haven't written (actually, I've gotten real bad about writing letters lately) but I just wanted to let you know how much I'm enjoying "World Without." It's truly a wonderful follow-up to Fantastic Four, and I'm very much enjoying your take on the Whackos.

It reminds me a bit of the Time-Space adventure, where we finally got the sense that the team was *Avengers* and not just Hawkeye's kooky West Coast team. Here, it's even bigger, as they fight on a grander scale. And the idea of Doom commanding a fleet of starships and trying to conquer the Shi'ar Empire is just so damn cool.

I'm not sold on the Lady Merveille name. To me, it still isn't as good as Captain Marvel, and I'm not sure anything else ever will be. But it's an interesting choice. And I'm thrilled to see her running with the Avengers again.

-Randy

Thanks for the kind words, Randy. One more this month, from Sam *BLACK PANTHER* Everett's Roomendations post to mv1talk.

WEST COAST AVENGERS #111--Bisquit's new Doom story is on a roll! The war against Doom is heating up, and now the stakes are higher! I like Pho--er, Lady Merveille's-- :) analysis of Hawkeye's decisions. That sounds just like her. I also like her fate at the end of the issue! What a cool visual that is! Oh, and poor Wondy and Cannonball! Ouch! Keep it up, Mark, because me likey!

I really do enjoy Monica quite a bit and I think she'll provide an interesting foil for Clint in the coming

months. Usually in superhero groups, you have the cool leader and the hot headed second in command, but here it's the opposite. The hothead is out front and the cool, calm one is standing behind him. It should be fun to see how this develops.

Also this month: HAWKEYE # 17 by Lonni Holland! Check it out! It's the best place on the 'net to get great Hawkeye stories!

NEXT ISSUE: Sure, sure, there's plenty going on next issue ... the Whackos search for Shape and Jolt, Lady Merveille's reasons for joining full-time are revealed, USAgent tells an SCN audience why he's quitting, a classic Marvel villain rears his ugly head (and I do mean ugly), Shape appears as you've never seen him before, but basically it all comes down to the one thing that you, the fans, have demanded and the timeline has finally allowed ... WONDER MAN STOPS MOPING!!!! Dare to believe, Whacko-Heads!

--- Mark ... 16.May.1999

WEST COAST AVENGERS # 114

FEB. YEAR 4 MV1 Presents ... Earth's Mightiest Heroes!!! AVENGERS



And there came a day when the foes became too great for Earth's Mightiest to handle alone!

On that day was born the West Coast Avengers!

114 NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS # 114

YOU LEAVE HOME FOR A FEW DAYS ...

written by Mark Bousquet

THE WEST COAST AVENGERS GATEFOLD

Previously ... Upon returning to Earth, the WCA was shocked to find Jocasta waiting for them, in a horrible state of disrepair. Councilman Proctor was proven innocent with the help of Falcon and the USAgent, but unknown to anyone, the Councilman was really a member of the Secret Empire. Agent also shocked the WCA by mentioning on SCN that he was leaving the team.

AVENGERS ROSTER

HAWKEYE - Clint Barton is an expert marksman, sporting a large supply of trick arrows; a former outlaw, he's the WCA's founding Chairman and tied to the WCA more than any other person.

QUICKSILVER - Pietro Maximoff is the twin brother of the Scarlet Witch, son of Magneto, husband to Crystal and father to Luna. He is a mutant possessing the power of acceleration.

LADY MERVEILLE - Monica Rambeau is a former Avengers Chairman, possesses the power to turn her body into any part of the electromagnetic spectrum.

WONDER MAN - Simon Williams became Wonder Man when the Enchantress had his body infused with ionic energy; a strong man with human failings, he struggles to live up to his power

TIGRA - Greer Nelson is a former biologist, changed by the Cat People into a modern version of their greatest warrior of legend

CANNONBALL - Samuel Guthrie has served with the New Mutants, X-Force and the X-Men; came to LA looking for direction and joined with the WCA

FALCON - former partner of Captain America and devoted social worker; thanks to his costume, Sam possesses the power of flight - RESERVE

CRYSTAL - a member of the Royal Family of Attilan, wife of Quicksilver and mother of Luna; can command the elemental forces - RESERVE

NON ROSTER CAST OF CHARACTERS

BETA RAY BILL - alien cyborg warrior, adopted of Asgard, Bill wields the Mjolnir-level hammer, Storm Breaker, a gift from Odin

JOCASTA - twisted and tortured by Ultron into becoming the Super-Adaptoid, then forced to face the Avengers who bruised and battered her, Jocasta has come to the WCA in hopes that they can help her regain her form and her sanity

BOVA - the first evolved creature of the High Evolutionary, Bova is an evolved cow that brought Quicksilver into the world; serves as a nanny to Luna
SHAPE - ex of the Squadron Supreme, Shape is a kind-hearted but slow shape changer

LUNA - the young daughter of the mutant Quicksilver and the Inhuman Crystal, Luna is, as far as anyone can tell, simply human

NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS

YOU LEAVE HOME FOR A FEW DAYS ...

written by Mark Bousquet

Go out yonder, peace in the valley, come downtown, had to rumble in the alley. Oh, you don't know, the shape I'm In -- "The Shape I'm In" by The Band

AVENGERS COMPOUND

"YEEEEEEEESSSSSSSSSS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Simon Williams practically floated across Avengers Compound from his bungalow to the large, Olympic sized swimming pool that was inlaid into the large patio right out the back of the main building. With another high-intensity yell, Wonder Man dove into the pool, causing water to splash up onto the sun deck, dousing Cannonball, Tigra, Crystal and Luna who were trying their best to soak in the hot rays of sun.

"Hey!" Cannonball, Tigra and Crystal screamed as their bodies reacted in shock to the colder water splashing up onto them.

"Whee!" Luna giggled. "More water! Wonder Man is funny!" While the three Avengers weren't exactly inclined to agree with little Luna, they didn't question her.

Wonder Man leapt out of the pool, landing right by the heroes, a wide grin resting upon his face. "Ain't this a great morning?" he asked, not seeming to be bothered by the fact

that he had leapt into a pool in full costume and sunglasses. "Hot sun, cool water, gentle breeze," he took his glasses off to look at Tigra and Crystal, "beautiful women."

The Avengers exchanged glances, "Are we in an alternate reality?" Tigra asked. "Or did I just miss something?"

"I'm guessing alternate reality," Sam Guthrie answered, shaking his head. "Although he was kinda happy on Mil'gromal when he was smashing things to bits."*

*** *West Coast Avengers # 111 - World Without Biscuit***

"Mmm, what was in your breakfast this morning?" Tigra asked, moving easily from the chair to put herself in Simon's chest. Sam felt a pang of something as she did so - it couldn't be jealousy, could it, he wondered. No, of course not. He was flattered that Tigra was bestowing her affections on him, but it wasn't like he was attracted to her or anything.

Yeah right, a voice inside his own head remarked to him, but he ignored it choosing instead to wonder what Tabitha was up to.*

*** *Can you smell the foreshadowing? - Hype Biscuit***

Simon smiled at his teammates, making them wait just a second for the answer. "Nothing like a dramatic pause, is there?" he asked. "Which is fitting I can do it so well because I just got a call from an up and coming Hollywood producer who wants to hire me for his movie!"

"Hey, that's great!" "Congratulations!" "Way to go, Simon!"

The Avengers all stood to shake Simon's hand and pat him on the back. "What kind of role is it, Simon?" Crystal asked.

"Some bad guy for some movie," Simon shrugged. "But hey, acting is acting and I've got to start somewhere near the bottom. Let's face it, I was never all that good before, so

I don't mind starting out small. Some kid just outta college is making it, and he thought I'd be good for this part. He wants me to come down and check it out."

"You don't mind doing a small film?" Tigra asked, frowning. "Are you sure you're Simon Williams?"

"Ha!" Simon laughed. "Hey, indie films are all the rage now. Look at Travolta. His career was nowhere. He does Pulp Fiction and suddenly they're throwing 20 mil a picture at him." Simon looked at all his friends and smiled even broader. "This is going to be the start of something good. I can tell."

Crystal smiled along with the rest of the assembled Avengers but inside she was just hoping that Simon wasn't going to get his hopes up too high.

INSIDE - ASSEMBLY ROOM

Down in the second sub-basement of the Compound, Hawkeye, Falcon and Quicksilver were busy in the Assembly room, pouring over the computer systems large files, looking for all relevant information about Arnim Zola. Hawkeye had a million things on his mind, he thought, and seriously needed some time to unwind. With everything that had happened to him lately - the journey back in time to the Old West* and the journey halfway across the galaxy to fight Dr. Doom** chief among them - he didn't really have time to go travelling off to find the missing Jolt and Shape*** or deal with Jack's leaving the team and whatever that entailed.****

*** *The OLD WEST SAGA in HAWKEYE 12 - 15***

**** *The WORLD WITHOUT storyline in WCA 109 - 112***

***** *They left in WCA 111***

****** *As Jack had revealed on the Super Channel Network - Last Issue***

"How are you feeling, Sam?" he asked the Falcon.

"Great. Why shouldn't I be?" Sam smiled. "I came to LA to free my friend from jail - who was only there to begin with thanks to Agent* - and that's what I did."

**** In WEST COAST AVENGERS 108 - Seems like a long time ago Biscuit***

"No chance of getting you to stick around then, huh?" Hawkeye asked, hopeful that Sam would reconsider. "We could certainly use you."

"Are you mad, Hawkeye?" Pietro asked. "You've got half the western world hanging out here."

"Here, Pietro," Clint rolled his eyes as he reached for a scrap of paper on the counter, "read this. See if you can figure it out."

"He's right, though, Clint," Falcon agreed with the mutant speedster. "Doesn't seem like you've got too many roster concerns these days."

"Sure we do," Clint disagreed. "We've got a base team of myself, Tigra, Pietro here, Cannonball, Lady Merveille and Wonder Man. That's only a six person team. Crystal, Living Lightning and you are only reserves - and you're on the way out the door, and Miguel hasn't exactly been just a phone call away. He missed the battle with Doom entirely. Bova, Luna, Shape and Jolt are basically just living here. Which is fine," he added quickly, seeing Pietro's head jerk towards him. "Beta Ray Bill and Jocasta are both injured, and I'm guessing that Bill, at least, is going to leave as soon as he's feeling better. We still don't have a scientist. Plus, who knows what kind of mental state Simon is in these days."

"Yeah, but a core team of six, plus three reserves isn't too bad," Falcon mused.

"I'd feel better with seven," Clint admitted, "or even eight or nine full-time members. In my opinion, which I know doesn't always count for much around here," Clint mumbled, looking to Pietro, "we need to have a few extra

members with the West Coast team. Back east you've got a city full of heroes. If the Avengers aren't around to handle something, chances are the Fantastic Four or the X-Men or the Defenders would be able to take care of the problem. If they're not, you've still got all the solo heroes jumping from rooftop-to-rooftop who might be able to do something. But out here there's no one, really, but us."

"There's the Champions," Falcon pointed out.

"The Champions?" Pietro interjected. "Have you seen what kind of ... opponents they face? We save the galaxy from Dr. Doom, they fight ... chimpanzees."*

**** You've got to read the CHAMPIONS if you haven't been, it's amazing! - Plug-o-matic Biscuit***

Hawkeye ignored him, "I'd still like a couple more people. I'm hoping to convince Bill to stay, but then again," he grinned, "I was hoping to convince you to stay as well and that doesn't seem to be working out."

Falcon grinned back, "Nope, it doesn't. I've really got to get back to New York. There's some ... things I need to find out about, but I'll stick around for a bit to help you out."*

**** What's Falcon got to find out about? How about a mysterious gift of \$250,000 that he received in CAPTAIN AMERICA 484! - Greenback Biscuit***

"Luna writes better than this," Pietro Maximoff scoffed, finally tiring of Hawkeye's whining, holding up the note that Jocasta had found.* It read, " **Jolt LeVe. LukInG ZOLA. shape FOLLO.**"

**** She gave it to Hawkeye last issue - Post It Biscuit***

"Why don't you save the comments and help us look, Quicksilver," Clint snapped. "Seems with your supposed super-speed you could do this a lot quicker than me or Falc."

"Well, Chairman," Pietro snapped back, "perhaps if you would let me at the controls, I would. But then, you never

have anything for me to do, do you?"

"What's that supposo-"

"Hey, relax guys," Sam Wilson sighed. "All we need to do is search the net database for the most recent sightings of Arnim Zola and then head off in those directions. Shape can take care of himself."

"I'm more worried about Jolt," Clint sighed, stepping away from the large, wall-sized computer screen. "She's been awfully steamed since she joined up with us* and didn't take too kindly to my assertion that she be nothing more than a trainee and that she'd have to go to school."**

*** *In the beezer penned WCA 104***

**** *In the post-beezer issue, WCA 107***

"She is just a kid," Falcon pointed out.

"I know, that's what I tried telling her," Hawkeye shook his head. "I was never that stubborn as a kid."

"No, you were that stubborn as an adult," Pietro announced, and Clint turned to say something to him, but Pietro wouldn't let him get the words out. "I've found what we're looking for," he said, pointing to the screen. "The last report on Zola placed him in northern Colorado, and, doing a quick search for reports of strange activity in the area, we have a place where we can start looking."

"Excellent," Hawkeye nodded. "Look, Pietro, I know there hasn't been a lot for you to do, yet, but there's-"

"Yes, yes, you needn't explain yourself to me, Hawkeye," Pietro said as he walked out the door. "I'll go round up the team. All six-hundred members. Classic Hawkeye overcompensatinWHOOOOOSH ..." Quicksilver took off down the hallway, leaving Falcon and Hawkeye scratching their heads.

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

As Monica Rambeau sat in the kitchen of her parents, she poured over enough financial statements to cover the kitchen table several times. She hated dishonesty, but she wasn't going to tell Hawkeye her exact reasons for wanting back on the roster full-time unless he came out and asked her. She knew that if she did tell him, he'd offer to do anything to help, but Monica didn't want help. There were some things a person needed to do for themselves.

Being dead broke thanks to a failed boating business was one of them.

She didn't want the Maria Stark Foundation swooping down and handing her a check. She had gotten herself in debt and now she'd get herself out of it. It was okay to accept the Avengers stipend of \$1,000 a week, she told herself, because she was earning it, but she didn't want charity.

Her father wouldn't allow it and even though Frank Rambeau was getting on in years, he was still head of the family and head of the Rambeau Boating, Incorporated company that he and Monica ran together.

"Afternoon, honey," Maria Rambeau hugged her daughter as she came into the kitchen. "Still trying to work out the finances, I see."

"Yeah," Monica nodded, her fingers clicking away on a calculator. "I've got a meeting with the Bank in an hour and there's a lot of number crunching still to do."

"I hope your father is okay by himself," she said with concern. "He's not as young as he used to be."

"None of us are, mom," Monica smiled. "That's the funny thing about time."

BEEP-BEEP-BEEEEEEP

"What's that?" Maria asked with concern.

"My Avengers Communi-card," Monica frowned. She hoped this wasn't anything too important. "Merveille here. What's up, Hawkeye?"

Hawkeye's face peered back at her from the card's surface. "We're going looking for Jolt and Shape. We think we've got a pretty good lead."

"Want me back?" Monica asked, hearing the doorbell ring behind her.

"We could certainly use you," Hawkeye answered honestly. "But we don't know what we're going to find-"

"Monica, there's a man here from the Bank to see you," Maria Rambeau announced from behind Monica.

"The Bank?" Hawkeye asked. "Everything okay?"

"Yes," Monica snapped, a little too quickly and Hawkeye caught the edge in her voice.

It was apparent that not everything was okay. "Tell you what, we've got Miguel here," Hawkeye lied, "and his powers are somewhat similar to yours. We can probably handle this. I'll give you a call if an emergency comes up. With your powers you can be there in half-a-second, anyway. That cool?"

"Sounds good, Clint," Monica forced a smile. "Thanks. Merveille out."

AVENGERS COMPOUND - ASSEMBLY ROOM

"Okay," Clint started, looking around the room at a table full of people. Wonder Man, Cannonball, Tigra, Falcon, US Agent, Quicksilver and Crystal looked back at him. "We're going looking for Shape and Jolt. Agent and Merveille aren't available. Bill and Jocasta are still too injured to do field work. Crystal, are you up to doing monitor duty? With the new computer system we had installed, you can do it from your bungalow if you'd like."

"Sounds good, Clint," Crystal nodded. "But I'd rather come along."

Hawkeye thought, then nodded. "Anybody else have any pressing reason why they can't go?"

"I've quit, remember?" Agent replied. "I've got things to look into."

"So why are you hanging around?" Tigra asked.

"Because I feel I owe the team an explanation," Jack began and Clint let him have the floor. "After the entire business with Councilman Proctor, I've got to reassess where I'm going as a hero and where I can do the most good. This isn't it. I've got things to follow up on that the Avengers can't help me with."

Jack pulled his mask on and turned to go. "See you folks around. Jack'll be back someday."

With that, USAgent left the building, leaving the team standing uneasily in place. Clint wanted to say something, but it could wait until later when he and Jack could talk privately.*

**** Check out HAWKEYE # 17 for that "conversation" - Cross Promoting Biscuit ...***

"I've got an appointment with a movie producer in an hour, Clint," Simon added to break the tension. "I'd hate to miss it, but I will if you need me."

Hawkeye thought for a moment. "No, go ahead."

"Excuse me, I hope I'm not interrupting," Bova said meekly as she entered the room, carrying a package.

"Not at all," Quicksilver said before Hawkeye could open his mouth. "What is it? Something with Luna?"

"No, nothing like that, Master Quicksilver. Luna's in the medlab with Beta Ray Bill and Jocasta. I hope that's alright?" Crystal nodded and Bova continued. "This package came for Master Guthrie."

"Huh?" Sam asked, curious. "For me? What is it?"

"I do not know," Bova responded, handing him the plain, brown-wrapped package.

Sam looked at it curiously then tore into it. "What the-?"

Clint, who was standing next to him, smiled, "A copy of *SUAVE* magazine? Really Sam. You're an Avenger now, you can't be buying magazines of naked women. Or, at least, you can't have them delivered here."

Sam's face was ashen white, "I gotta leave, Hawkeye. Like, right now and I don't know when I'm coming back."

"Whu- why?" Hawkeye asked, wondering just how bad this day could turn out to be. He was feeling more rejected than the tall girl at a sixth grade dance. "Just because we caught you with some pornography?"

"No," Sam stammered, his face losing even more color. "Remember I was telling you guys about Tabitha, my ex-girlfriend."

"The one named Boom-Boom, er, Meltdown?" Tigra wondered aloud.

"Yeah."

"What about her?" Crystal asked.

Sam held up the copy of *SUAVE* . "That's her on the cover."

MEDLAB

"You have a face like a horse."

"Luna!" Bova yelled, entering the room. "Where are your manners? That's not a nice thing to say to Mr. Beta Ray Bill."

The cyborg-alien warrior who was the champion of his people laughed heartily. "That's okay, Bova. We mustn't dim the child's honesty. It's such a hard trait to find as people get older."

"I ... I don't understand, Bill," Jocasta, the dark green robot said softly to Bill. "She makes jest with your features and you are ... okay with that?"

Bill looked at the misshapen robot and his smile lessened. Jocasta had come here to the Compound looking for help* after her creator, Ultron, had updated her as the Super-Adaptoid.** Her body had rebooted itself, but it wasn't fully operational, yet. Her form still looked like a child's crayon scribbles. Her left arm had been Captain America's shield instead of an arm, while her right was hugely muscled with a copy of Thor's hammer Mjolnir sticking out of the end of her arm. Slowly her body was taking on a more human appearance, but with no real scientist on hand, things were progressing slowly. Physically, she was better, but mentally Bill couldn't say how long it would take for her to recover.

*** *In WEST COAST AVENGERS 112***

**** *See AVENGERS 408 - 412 for all the details***

He knew he had to proceed gently, "We all have to laugh at ourselves sometime, Jocasta. And if we must laugh at ourselves, better to laugh at our outer shells than the person inside. If little Luna thinks I have the face of a horse, I can laugh at her innocence because what I look like has so little to do with who I am on the inside."

"But if we look like freaks ...?"

"Listen to Master Bill, Jocasta," Bova spoke gently, placing one of her bovine-evolved hands on Jocasta's metal skin. "Our insides are so much more important."

Jocasta bowed her head and wondered if they were right. The words sounded right, but inside ... inside Jocasta thought they felt all wrong.

OUTSIDE THE COMPOUND

The WCA stood by the Quinjet, saying good-byes. Simon headed off to his movie interview, while Cannonball shot

across the sky, clutching the magazine (re-wrapped in brown paper) to his chest. USAgent was nowhere to be seen.

Hawkeye opened the Quinjet door and Tigra, Falcon, Quicksilver and Crystal boarded. 'Not exactly the heaviest hitters the Avengers have ever rolled out,' Hawkeye sighed inwardly. 'God, why does the roster have to be such a concern when I'm in charge ... I can almost hear Bobbi laughing at me ...'

TWO HOURS LATER - NORTHERN COLORADO

Hawkeye, Falcon, Quicksilver, Tigra and Crystal rode in silence, checking instrument read-outs, scanning the ground below, thinking quietly to themselves. They needed to find Shape and Jolt and, if Arnim Zola was involved, stop him from doing whatever it was he was up to. Tigra paced in silence, hating the closed quarters.

Which was never anything good.

"Clint, I've got a large energy flare up a mile west from here."

"Thanks, Falc. Let's go check it out." Hawkeye steered the Quinjet west as night was just beginning to fall. Within seconds they came over a ridge and saw a large gathering below them. Lights flooded upwards as a throng of people stood in front of a large stage. "I want an audio and visual lock on that stage," Hawkeye ordered and Crystal immediately set to the task.

"I'm bringing it up on screen," Crystal answered and half the front windshield became a monitor. Hawkeye lowered the Quinjet to the ground as he watched the monitor. This may not be what they were looking for, but he could feel that something was wrong here. "What is that they're chanting?" Crystal asked.

Tigra answered, "This is the way ... the way to the light ... the light to the future ... oh, pooh, just turn the blasted

volume up."

Crystal smiled, "Yeah, I could do that, but you chant so nicely."

Tigra playfully stuck her tongue out. They listened to the crowd, whose voices were growing louder and louder, "This is the way ... the way to the light ... the light to the future ... the future to Paradise ... this is the way ... the way to the light ... the light to the future ... the future to Paradise ... this is the way ..."

"Just a religious meeting," Falcon shrugged.

"A cult?" Tigra asked.

"Of course not," Quicksilver snapped, "all upstanding churches meet out in the woods in the middle of the night."

The Quinjet landed and they exited the craft, moving slowly through the woods. They reached the edge of the camp, the chanting loud enough now that they couldn't talk to each other without leaning in close.

"AND NOW!" came a booming voice, cutting above the chanting, though they couldn't see any speakers. "THE MAN WHO CAN LEAD YOU TO TOMORROW!"

"Five bucks says it's the Hate Monger," Hawkeye grumbled.

A man in all white robes walked out to the center, his head covered. "Oh, yeah, definitely the Hate Monger." The man pulled his robe open at the chest to reveal ...

"ARNIM ZOLA!" Hawkeye shouted, but no one heard him as the crowd erupted in adulation.

"Welcome, my children!" Arnim Zola yelled from the stage, his face grotesquely sitting where his chest should be. "It is so good to see you all again! Let us welcome forth our newest brother!"

The crowd hushed as a tall, thin man walked proudly to the center of the stage. He was nearly naked, covered in

only a pair of speedo shorts. His physique was flawless and there appeared to be no hair on his body.

"Thank thee for thine glorious welcome!" the tall man's voice boomed in English theatre accented rhythms. "It is an honour to walk amongst my fellow brothers! Truth is the glory and the glory is in all of you!"

"I present to you," Zola wailed, moving to stand next to him, "the newest convert to our way of life ... SHAPE!"

"No way," Hawkeye's jaw dropped. "No freaking way."

... to be continued ...

WEST COAST LINES

Comments c/o mariner2@tiac.net

Shape as Yul Bruener. Dig.

The roster is, believe it or not, actually taking shape. Cannonball will be leaving the title, I'm afraid, but it seemed a little selfish of me to have all these characters and not let Shawn have him for the excellent X-Force. Sam will stop by now and then, but for now he's back in X-Force. Check it out on the Four Corners Branch. I'll miss Sam and now that he's not here his appearances don't really serve much of a point, but I know he'll be in good hands with Shawn.

On to the letters ...

Hey Mark! Wow! Well, I still wish that Doom had won, but I suppose I can live with him only inspiring one planet to rise up against the Sh'iar! I have to admit, I expected cutting off Wonder Man's hand would blow up the whole ship. I wonder what that ionic radiation leak could do to those Sh'iar. I expected Deathbird to weigh in on Doom's side, but ultimately I'm glad she didn't. I can't wait to see the conclusion of the subplot involving the councilman soon. It took me this long to realize he was named after the Mike

Proctor of the old AML! Anyway, keep up the great work Mark!

-- TJ Burns

I wanted Doom to win, I really did, but the way things fell externally, it wasn't really possible. I hear some others have some plans for Doom, so we'll have to keep our eyes peeled. And a rebellion has to start somewhere. I don't think we've seen the last of Doom's handiwork inside Shi'ar space. And now another letter from TJ!

Hey Mark! Well, I loved the very untraditional ending for the Proctor story arc. I hate that Agent is leaving as he's the only member of the current team that really ranks among my favorites. I hope that Falcon doesn't stick around either... it wouldn't be nearly as fun without Agent. I like the Cannonball/Tigra thing, and having Wonder Man get back to his old self is great! Here's hoping Beta Ray Bill joins... Keep up the good work!

-- TJ Burns

Thanks TJ. I hope you like what's coming. With this issue I really get to start working on the stories I want to tell. Thanks for writing, TJ! (And yes, Falc won't be staying without Agent.)

Hello Mark

You might recognize me - I wrote to you about your Inhumans series (which is, by the way, getting more interesting with every issue and which I would love even more if you promise me you aren't going to kill off Black Bolt). Now that I discovered that you're writing for Avengers West Coast as well, I had to write to you about that one too.

Thank you so much for the great roster! I love Tigra and she and Cannonball would make the most amazing couple. Pietro has always been one of my favorite characters, just please don't make him the unredeemable bastard people

tend to think he is. I think I can get used to Hawkeye and USAgent. Flacon and Wonder Man are fine by me, and Monica's new code name is cool. Lady Merveille. It sounds so nice!

The Worlds Without thing was nice but messy. I didn't quite understand it all, but I liked what I did understand. Oh, is Beta Ray Bill (where did they scrap THAT name off???) staying with them Whacokes or does he have other fish to fry? (Please forgive me, I read the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy too many times).

Currently, you open up many storylines, and I need time to figure them all out. So Greer and Sam are an item, that robot, what was her name, is deformed, something's wrong with Wonder Man, and Quicksilver doubts his place in the team. Some troubles these super types have! Well, anyway, know that I enjoy AWC very much and I'm with you all the way. Keep up the good work. And until Lady Merveille discovers that she isn't really from New Orleans but from Micronezia and would have to change her code name once again, make mine MV1! (Wait, that didn't come out quite right... argh, never mind!)

Your faithful reader
Joannie Milligan

Kill off Black Bolt? Never! He's one of my very favorite characters. Someday I'd even like to do a Black Bolt LS ...

Quicksilver isn't an insufferable bastard. He's just insufferable. ;-) I think I'm enjoying writing Pietro over any other character right now. He's such a complex guy that he never gets boring to write. Beta Ray Bill is sticking around for a good long while. Where'd they get the name? Hey, he's a Walt Simonson creation - he has to be cool. Thanks for

**writing Joannie, everything will make sense in time.
Just keep reading!**

That's all for now, folks. Be here ...

NEXT ISSUE: FREAK SHOW! The WCA vs. Arnim Zola and Shape? Simon on the set of his new movie, he's feeling great, so why's he fainting?

Plus, check out HAWKEYE 17 for more tales of the Avenging Archer! Written by Lonni Holland, Hawkeye and Jack have a chat about Jack's decision to leave the team!

-- Mark Bousquet ... 20.August.1999

West Coast Avengers 115

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And there came a day when the foes became too great for Earth's Mightiest to handle alone!

On that day was born the West Coast Avengers!

115 NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS # 115

FREAK SHOW

written by Mark Bousquet

THE WEST COAST AVENGERS GATEFOLD

Previously ... Agent shocked the WCA by mentioning on SCN that he was leaving the team. Cannonball left the team to track down his ex-girlfriend Meltdown and find out why she's on the cover of a nudie-mag. Hawkeye led the Whackos to Colorado to look for Arnim Zola, Jolt and Shape. They found Zola and Shape ... sort of. Read on ...

AVENGERS ROSTER

HAWKEYE - Clint Barton is an expert marksman,

sporting a large supply of trick arrows; a former outlaw, he's the WCA's founding Chairman and tied to the WCA more than any other person.

QUICKSILVER - Pietro Maximoff is the twin brother of the Scarlet Witch, son of Magneto, husband to Crystal and father to Luna. He is a mutant possessing the power of acceleration.

LADY MERVEILLE - Monica Rambeau is a former Avengers Chairman, possesses the power to turn her body into any part of the electromagnetic spectrum.

WONDER MAN - Simon Williams became Wonder Man when the Enchantress had his body infused with ionic energy; a strong man with human failings, he struggles to live up to his power

TIGRA - Greer Nelson is a former biologist, changed by the Cat People into a modern version of their greatest warrior of legend

FALCON - former partner of Captain America and devoted social worker; thanks to his costume, Sam possesses the power of flight - **RESERVE**

CRYSTAL - a member of the Royal Family of Attilan, wife of Quicksilver and mother of Luna; can command the elemental forces - **RESERVE**

NON ROSTER CAST OF CHARACTERS

BETA RAY BILL - alien cyborg warrior, adopted of Asgard, Bill wields the Mjolnir-level hammer, Storm Breaker, a gift from Odin

JOCASTA - twisted and tortured by Ultron into becoming the Super-Adaptoid, then forced to face the Avengers who bruised and battered her, Jocasta has come to the WCA in hopes that they can help her regain her form and her sanity

BOVA - the first evolved creature of the High Evolutionary, Bova is an evolved cow that brought Quicksilver into the world; serves as a nanny to Luna

SHAPE - ex of the Squadron Supreme, Shape is a

kind-hearted but slow shape changer

LUNA - the young daughter of the mutant Quicksilver and the Inhuman Crystal, Luna is, as far as anyone can tell, simply human

NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS

FREAK SHOW

written by Mark Bousquet

NORTHERN COLORADO

Arnim Zola's grotesque face seemed to fill the world. "I present to you, the newest convert to our way of life, the lost soul from another world, SHAPE!"

The West Coast Avengers - Hawkeye, Falcon, Tigra, Quicksilver and Crystal - stood behind a throng of people in the middle of the Northern Colorado woods and stared with their mouths collectively agape. On a large revival stage ahead of them, Arnim Zola stood like a savior to the people before him and Shape, the former member of the Squadron Supreme who had been staying with the Whackos, stood next to him.

But it wasn't the Shape that they had last seen. No, this Shape looked to be close to seven feet tall, thin and muscled and spoke, not in the childish tones they were accustomed, but rather like a Shakespearean trained actor.

"This isn't happening," Tigra mumbled.

"Oh, I think it is," Falcon answered, though he didn't believe it, either. All eyes were glued to the stage.

"I bid thee welcome!" Shape declared, his slow, innocently booming voice replaced by stage theatrics. "This is the first day of the rest of thine's lives! Master Zola can take away all of thoust pain, all thoust struggles with thine inadequacies and give thou the chance to start yon life again!"

"Is that correct Old English?" Tigra whispered to Falcon. "It sure doesn't sound like Thor. Not that I completely understand why he speaks that way, either ..." A sharp look from Pietro answered the question for her.

"I was once a slow, dumb, ugly clod of a baboon," Shape continued, pacing back and forth across the stage. Behind him, coming to life between two large spotlights that sat behind the stage was a large video monitor. An image of Shape as the Avengers had last seen him, shorter and fatter, but still with the tight black shorts burst onto the screen. "But after only a few treatments from Master Zola, I am a new man in body and mind and with the body and the mind, so changed the soul!"

As the image changed to show Shape as he currently was, the crowd roared in approval and the Avengers found themselves taking steps back into the shadows. Hawkeye didn't think it would be wise for the Avengers to make their presence known just yet.

"I see the pain and agony etched upon yon faces!" Shape bellowed. "Why should those in the flaming pits of the Babylon that is Hollywood be the only ones graced with perfect looks? You are the real people of America! You should look however you wish to look!" Shape stopped pacing and leaned down to look at the audience closely. "Join Zola and you shall look as you do in your dreams! And with the change in your looks, a miraculous change in your soul will take place leading you into a new day!" He moved into a dramatic pause that would have impressed even Laurence Olivier. "Who is with us?"

The crowd chanted their response in unison. "This is the way! The way to the light! The light to the future! The future to Paradise!!!"

"This does not look good," Hawkeye mumbled under his breath and the Avengers took yet another step back.

SANTA MONICA BOULEVARD

Simon Williams smiled like a child on Christmas morning.

"So you'll do it?" a young woman standing in front of him asked hopefully.

"Absolutely, Charlie!" Simon beamed.

"Yes!" she yelled and jumped up and down. "Yes, that's fantastic! I can't believe that- wait. You do know the pay is lousy, right?"

Simon chuckled. "Yes, I do. That's not a problem."

"Wow, I can't believe it. A real Avenger. In my movie! Yes!" Charlie shook Simon's hand excitedly. "I'm sorry to act so excited, but you've got to understand, an independent film like this, by a first time director, a female director no less, getting someone - anyone - with a name means a tremendous amount. You being in this film might even get some investors to kick in some more money."

"Hey, anything I can do to help," Simon shrugged as he looked around the set. "Well," he smiled, "just don't ask me to call Tony Stark, okay?" This felt so right to Simon. He loved acting and just being back on a set had him feeling better than he had since he reformed his energy.

"I should tell you that I've changed your role a bit to suit you," Charlie interrupted as she tore threw the script in her hands, looking for the green pages that signified this, the film's fifth rewrite.

"Oh?" Simon asked, not knowing if he should be flattered or insulted that the role was changed. He wasn't exactly an Oscar caliber actor by any stretch. He hoped she hadn't dumbbed the part down any. Not that the part could be dumbbed down a whole lot. The script was excellent, but this particular part wasn't anything special. Still, though, it was a movie and it did come with a lot of screen time. "Like what?"

"Well, you've got a presence. Like Sly and Arnold. But the difference is that while they look like they can tear down a building, you really can," she reached the page she was looking for and stopped, showing Simon the script. "It's basically the same part, except instead of just being the villain's muscles, you're now the villain's muscle who's secretly the mastermind of the entire operation!" She smiled enthusiastically.

Simon's smile matched hers. "Wow, that's ... incredible! I just hope I can deliver."

Charlie grabbed his arms, "I'm sure you can, Simon. And there's more."

"More?"

"More," she smiled and Simon, for not the last time found himself drawn down into her dazzling brown eyes. "See, you're not just some thug. Even though you're real low-key, real quiet and serious, you're the god of the underworld himself." She flashed her eyebrows up and down at him. "You're Pluto!"

Simon flashed his ionic eyes at her and a wry smile played over his face. "Sounds like fun." Simon felt a sharp pain flash through his head and he felt suddenly dizzy. "Say, Charlie," he asked as he righted himself, glad that his director had missed him grabbing his head, "do you have a room where I can make a phone call?"

"There's a phone over there," Charlie pointed, smiling.

"I need a private one," Simon forced a smile. "Avengers business."

Charlie shrugged. "Sure, right over there. Go through that door and into the office."

"Thanks," Simon mumbled, already moving towards the office. Reaching the door, he saw three handles. 'Bruce always said to pick the middle one,' he thought to himself as

he let himself in the small, bare room. With all his energy he shut the door and then proceeded to pass out on the floor.

Somewhere across the plains of reality, a large figure felt a buzzing in the back of his brain and for not the first time, his attention would soon be focused on the planet Earth.

NORTHERN COLORADO

"What do we do, boss?" Tigra asked as the Avengers watched the crowd before them split and move to both ends of the stage and disappear behind a large curtain. Some of the gathered throng waited, not sure about whether to join the flock or not.

Hawkeye turned away to look at the Avengers standing before him: Tigra, Quicksilver, Crystal and Falcon. His fingers played with the Avengers Communicard in one of his pockets, contemplating whether he should call Merveille in on this now. They could use her, but he wasn't certain she was necessary and he didn't want to disturb whatever was going on with her and the bank back in New Orleans.*

*** *See Last Issue***

'If only Jack was around ...' he thought, then erased it from his mind.*

*** *Jack being USAgent - see Last Issue and HAWKEYE 17 for details***

"We need to find out just what Zola is doing back there," Hawkeye announced, telling everyone exactly what they already knew. He heard Pietro cough in agitation but ignored him. "From the air we could see a couple of very large tents set up in the back. Priority one is getting inside those tents without being discovered to see what's going on. Priority two is talking with Shape - without alerting Zola to our presence.

"Here's what we'll do. Crys, you and me will go round up some clothes inside the Quinjet and move inside the tents

by getting in line. Sam, take to the air and see what you can find. Tigra, since you're not going to pass for ordinary, I want you to sit in the Quinjet and gather research-

"Yawn," Tigra sighed.

"Are you giving me lip, Tigra?" Hawkeye snapped, causing all of the Avengers to take notice. "Don't forget we're here to find Jolt, too. God knows what she's gotten herself into. Look for any signs of her and keep an open com with all of us. Quicksilver, watch Shape and look for a moment when you can steal him away to talk to. Let's move it, people."

Hawkeye walked off in a huff towards the Quinjet, leaving the Avengers watching him curiously and wondering just what it was he was going through.*

**** Of course, since you've been reading Lonni's HAWKEYE you know what Clint is dealing with. What, you're not reading HAWKEYE? Gah! Why not! Between Agent and Variable and that trip to the past and- wait, if I tell you, you might not read it and everyone should read it!***

AVENGERS COMPOUND - MEDLAB

"...and then Ymir sent a storm hurtling across the city of Asgard and the very roof of the building we were standing in was torn off!" Beta Ray Bill spoke forcefully from his hospital bed to his enraptured audience of Luna and Bova.

"Oh no!" Luna cried. "What happens next?"

Beta Ray Bill chuckled. "That shall have to wait until tomorrow night, fair Luna. Now, the time for sleep has come and you need to make preparations for bed."

"But I'm not tired!" Luna slammed her hands to the floor of the MEDLAB.

"Now, Luna," Bova started, but Luna had already thrown her hands in the air.

"At least on TV commercials don't last until the next night!"

Bill laughed at the child and even Bova had to suppress a smile.

"Come, Luna," Bova said gently as Luna stormed off down the hallway, leaving Bill alone. "Night Bill!" she called back without turning around.

The cyborg-alien-adopted-son-of-Asgard sighed heavily and flexed his back. His ribs felt better and he certainly didn't need to be confined to this bed any longer. He looked to the empty bed on the other side of the room. 'In fact,' he thought, 'since the only reason I even stayed in this bed was to give comfort to the robot Jocasta, there's no need for me to remain at all.'

But he didn't move more than to flex the muscles in his leg.

Staying here had been a pleasant diversion in the aftermath of the battle against Dr. Doom's warships,* but it was now time to make plans for what came next. They had defeated Doom so there was no reason to return to space. He supposed he could make a voyage to Latveria to see if the monarch had returned, but the Fantastic Four had been alerted and were the best equipped to assess the situation with Doom. They'd promised to keep the Avengers updated.

*** *Back during the WORLD WITHOUT saga in issues 108 - 112***

'So where do I go from here?' he wondered again. 'Asgard? Back to space with the Scuttlebutt? Where?'

In the back of his mind he wondered if where he was wasn't the place he'd like to stay for awhile. In the front of his mind, he wondered where Jocasta had gotten off to. He pushed himself out of bed. "Only one way to find out."

COMPOUND - BASEMENT

The Super-Adaptoid powered form of Jocasta sat in one of the lab's in the basement of the Compound and concentrated. Her body was damaged, a result of a fight between her and the Avengers. It was a long story that she did not want to dwell on.*

*** *Recounted completely in WEST COAST AVENGERS***
113

She had come to the West Coast for help, but there was no scientist in residence here to help her with her problem of reforming her dark green body from the mangled shape it was in - a task that was almost completed. She looked, for the first time, feminine again. Her feet and legs were completely back to normal and all that was left was to reconstruct were her arms and shoulders.

Soon she'd be complete.

Despite what Beta Ray Bill had told her,* and the sense that it had made, she didn't fully believe that the insides of a person was what was truly important. If that was the case, why did so many people spend so much on plastic surgery? Why was food touted as being "low-fat" to help people lose weight?

*** *Last Issue***

'No,' she thought as she struggled to work out the kinks in her right arm, 'there's more to a person than what is on the inside. There's nothing wrong ... nnnhhhh ... with wanting to look normal.' She closed her eyes. 'Or even beautiful.'

And in the darkness, the doubly-made creation of Ultron kept trying to make herself comfortable with how the Super Adaptoid body worked. If she could break the code completely ... 'Why,' a smile spread across her metallic lips, 'I could be anyone I wanted to.'

NORTHERN COLORADO

Shape stood on the stage, showering the people below him with words of encouragement. "Trust in the power of healing! For certainly God did not intend for Man to be ugly creatures, did he? No, so come inside and feel the healing powers of Zola!"

Below, his face kept low in his coat, Clint Barton made a point to not make eye-contact with Shape. Across the way he knew Crystal would be doing the same. He didn't trust the situation. Without knowing exactly what had happened to Shape, and considering Arnim Zola, the freak geneticist was behind it, that wasn't a surprise.

More important to Clint was how did Jolt play a role in all of this. Was she already here? What had happened to her? What role did Shape play in all this? Was he under some kind of mind control?

Clint knew that Jolt had left the Compound to come looking for Zola, but beyond that, he was in the dark.

He didn't like the feeling.

Only a few feet from the edge of the stage and the large curtain that blocked off the tent behind it from sight, Clint stole a glance over at Crystal. He glimpsed her for only a moment as she was swallowed by what lay beyond the stage.

Back at the head of the clearing, Quicksilver stood in silence, his eyes peeled to Crystal. Hawkeye had told him to watch Shape, but he knew the Avengers Chairman wouldn't fault him for keeping his eyes on his wife for as long as possible. 'Besides,' Pietro scoffed, watching Crystal vanish, 'Shape might have changed his appearance and manner, but he's still a loud-mouthed oaf. He wouldn't be too hard to find.'

Another thirty seconds and the clearing that stood between the stage and Pietro was now empty. Everyone had gone into the tents.

Everyone, that is, but Quicksilver and Shape.

A fifth of a thought later, Shape wasn't alone on the stage.

"Hello, Shape. If that's who you are."

"Gah!" Shape jumped, startled. "Oh, Quicksilver. What are you doing here?"

Pietro looked at him with an expressionless face. "Guess."

Shape had recovered from the surprise. "Guess like twenty questions?" he asked, a smile breaking free on his face. "I do so enjoy the frivolity of games."

"Where's Jolt?" the mutant speedster asked, trying to control his anger.

"I haven't a clue!" Shape smiled. "I left to look for her and ended up here. By troth, do you have any idea how abhorrent riding a bus can be? The grunge, the despondent humanity ... the grungy humanity! I happened to come across this very spot. I found Zola, or rather, he found me. He hadn't a clue where the lovely young Jolt was, but he was more than willing to aid me in shedding my previous self. Isn't the new me wonderful?"

Shape ran his hands down his seven foot tall body to show off his new form, enjoying the look of himself.

When his eyes returned to Quicksilver, the Avenger wasn't impressed. "What's going on here, Shape?"

"We're preparing for the End," Shape said seriously. "Giving everyone some hope before the End of the World comes and we are delivered into Paradise."

Pietro looked at him, his anger increasing with every beat of his heart. "No, really."

"Yes, really."

The mutant speedster sighed, "You're hopeless."

THE TENT - CRYSTAL

Crystal was ushered into a large tent. She didn't know what she was expecting to find inside, but what she saw clearly wasn't it. Instead of some diabolical setting, she was suddenly thrust into a carnival tent.

People milled about freely and openly. Smiles replaced the anxious looks of outside. If they came to the clearing with troubles in mind, they seemed to be able to lose them inside this tent.

Around the outskirts of the tent, tables were set up. At some you could get food or lemonade. Others held games, but Crystal didn't see anyone paying for anything. 'Heck, I don't even see anyone losing. Everyone's going home with toys for all their kids.' The large table at the far end held the most people gathered around, so that's the direction Crystal moved in.

"A piece of fruit?" a smiling man asked as he made his way to Crystal with a tray of sliced offerings. "Nothing quenches the soul like a piece of fresh, juicy fruit. Wouldn't you agree?"

Crystal was taken aback by the man's sudden appearance, but she quickly recovered. "No thank you," she smiled politely. "I'm not that hungry. But I do agree - fresh fruit is wonderful."

"As you wish, madam," the man bowed as he moved along to offer the tray to another. The fruit had looked delicious, but Crys was playing this as safe as she could.

She reached the front of the large tent, the crowd growing thicker as she approached. People were signing registration cards and smiling, promising to come back next week and yes, thank you kindly, I wouldn't mind asking my friends to join me next week.

'Zola's scamming them,' Crystal frowned. 'He's getting all these people to come up here so he can do who knows what

with them. Picking on those that need the help the most ... disgusting. But what, exactly, is the scam?'

THE SECOND TENT - HAWKEYE

Clint had no carnival. He stood in a straight line with the rest of the folks, moving ahead one small step at a time. The people whispered excitedly to one another and Hawkeye strained to hear what they were saying.

'Time's like this ...' he mused as he reached his hand up to his ears to turn up his hearing aids. He wondered what the public would say if they knew just how hard of hearing he was.

"This must be the day!"

"I can't believe it! I've been here all three times and I've yet to choose the right tent!"

"And now we're going to meet Zola!"

Hawkeye listened carefully, gathering all the information he could. From what he could tell, Zola hadn't yet done anything wrong with these people. 'Yet being the operative word.' The people were from a small logging town that was being slowly shut down as the land they hacked to pieces emptied of trees. Zola had come here a few months back under the auspice of a religious meeting and had been helping the people with food and clothes, asking for nothing in exchange.

Even more, he'd been using his machines to help heal the people. Broken bones, arthritis, bad backs ... the people seemed to think he could do anything. Hawkeye couldn't help but be surprised at all the good the former Nazi-lackey was doing. 'It's amazing what all this science we have at our disposal can do for the common man,' Hawkeye thought to himself as he continued to move forward, one step at a time.

NEW ORLEANS - RAMBEAU BOATING

Monica Rambeau stood at the spot on the pier where her and her father ran their boating business. Frank Rambeau had taken the boat out into the waters, though Monica knew there'd be nothing for him to do out there but waste fuel. They were a "complete boating business" as their cards read, but that just meant they'd do anything for money.

They'd do fishing, they'd take tourists fishing, they'd take tourists out for a spin, they'd rent the boats - all two of them - out to anyone who wanted it.

It wasn't working. The boats were bringing in money at only 75% of what they needed to break even. The culprit was down at the other end of the pier - a fancy business with luxury yachts for the wealthy to party the night away in.

No criminal empire. No mastermind trying to take over Mardi Gras.

Just business. Just a big company offering a service that a small company couldn't.

They didn't have much time to have things get better, either. The man from the bank had been kind,* but there was no doubting his message. They were in debt. They couldn't make their payments. They owed the bank money and if they missed two payments in a row the bank would own their boats, their boating business and probably their home, as well.

*** *Last Issue***

A tear ran down Monica's face, but it wasn't for her. It was for her mother and father. Two people she'd do absolutely anything for.

She smiled, thinking of what her father had said the first time it was apparent their money was sliding away.

"Maybe those Heroes for Hire folks are hiring."

THE SECOND TENT - HAWKEYE

"Hello, Hawkeye."

"Zola." Clint nodded as he approached the standing form of Arnim Zola. Shape stood next to him, a hand on the geneticist's shoulder. Though he wasn't wearing his costume, Clint had no doubt that Zola would know who he was. "You're looking pleasantly non-psychotic today."

"Ah, always the joker," Zola grinned pleasantly. Clint found this smile more disturbing than the insanity driven smile that usually resided on Zola's face-inside-his-chest. "I have found peace in my old age."

"I don't believe it."

"No, of course not," Zola sighed and Hawkeye began to feel uncomfortable as a tent-full of people closed in behind him. "As hard as it is to change, it is always harder to convince others that the grip of evil has left the heart. I do not hold you in ill regard for this." Zola fixed him with his gaze. "Would you like me to fix your hearing?"

"Alright, that's enough," Clint snapped. "What the hell's going on here? You and Shape are actually like ... like ..."

"Like normal people?" Shape asked, the hurt evident in his voice.

"I was going to say like bad British actors, but yeah, normal works," Clint said, momentarily ashamed. "Shape, no offense, but you're not the Shape we knew. As for you Zola, you're a Nazi gene freak. You should be mutating these folks into freaks, not giving them clothes and food!"

"Why?" Zola asked. "Because it is easier for you that way? No, do not answer," Zola waved his hand at the Avenger. "Just go. I have done nothing wrong save act for a doctor to these kind souls whom the world has spat upon. I will not ask you to understand my change of heart, just that you respect my desire to do good now. I need no army of freaks to do my bidding, Avenger. The good, normal, healthy

people of Colorado - people that I made well - will do it for me. Isn't that right, my friends?"

"YES!" the explosion of voices behind Hawkeye startled the Archer and he turned to face a mob of angry people.

"This isn't over Zola," Clint threatened as he turned back around. Zola only smiled. They locked eyes in a battle of wills, Clint desperately searching for some sign of Zola's insanity.

It didn't come.

"Will you leave us in peace, Avenger?" Zola asked.

"I will," Clint spat, not seeing any choice. He wasn't about to injure innocent people.

"Before you go," Zola smiled up at Clint, "take a gift. We wish you nothing but the best for the time ahead. You have only to think and we shall come and deliver you. Brother Shape? The card, please. And remember, Avenger, anytime you want your hearing restored ..."

Hawkeye looked to Shape, who found the strength to meet his gaze. His hand came out and Hawkeye shook it. When Shape's hand was retracted, Clint found a card in his palm. It read:

THE ENLIGHTENMENT FOUNDATION

... this is the way to the light ...

NOT THE END

WEST COAST LINES

Comments c/o mariner2@tiac.net

Our first letter this month is a bit of a downer. Not that the content is sad, but that it's a reminder that the author - Randy Lander - has moved on from MV1 for the time being. Randy has landed a gig as the EiC of psychomic.com and everyone here at MV1 wishes him the best in his venture. While we'll miss him here

at MV1 where his contributions are too numerous to mention, I'm excited for him and the opportunity he's got now. Stop by at psyComic and see what he's up to.

WEST COAST AVENGERS #113

One of the downsides of stealing characters from Mark is knowing about his plans in advance. :) See, I knew Jolt was leaving and I knew US Agent was going to go eventually. Although the latter was more because I knew of Mark's dislike of the character than anything else. But even knowing that, watching the way it's done was always fun. It was **so** like Jack to let Hawkeye find out via a TV interview.

I do not envy Mark the size of the cast he has here. I've faced the same large cast on New Warriors, and have begun to cut down a bit as a result. But most characters get a good focus, and it's such a treat for me to see Monica Rambeau getting more of a spotlight. While Sam is still a bit much in the "aw, shucks" mode for me, I do really enjoy the interplay between him and Tigra. And it was a pleasure to see a nice, quiet scene between Crystal and Quicksilver where they act like a happy couple instead of fighting.

The main plot, featuring US Agent and Falcon (aka Captain Conservative and Mr. Liberal) teamed up on an investigation, was a lot of fun. If the

Proctor plot hadn't already run so long, I would have liked to see this team-up extended over more than one issue, so we could see more sparks fly between the two. And the end of the Proctor plot was a shocker...we'd been so obviously set up to see Proctor as a wronged innocent, the revelation of his true affiliation came out of nowhere. Very nice.

-- Randy Lander

From Sam Everett's Roo-Commendations:
WEST COAST AVENGERS #112-113 (Mark "The Bisquit" Bousquet)--Quite an ending to the space saga running through the last few issues, but what I liked best was the explanation of how Doom could appear on Earth and be in space at the same time...well done, Mark! I could have used more team interaction throughout the story, but I suppose different missions had to be done, so the team had to split up. I liked #113 better because of the team interaction, and also because of the intriguing ending involving Michael Proctor! I never saw that coming! At least Falcon seems to have a fairly permanent home now...as long as he's with the Whackos, I'll be with this book. Shoot, the same goes for Mark himself! :)

I wouldn't get rid of Falcon, would I ...? As those of you know who read my other work, Sam is leaving the WCA for LIGHTHOUSE. Check it out on the Cosmic Branch and keep reading WCA to see how it is he

leaves the Avengers for the floating space station. Thanks for writing, Sam. Sam has been one of the very most consistent reviewers for MV1, so due him a favor and check out BLACK PANTHER and TRIATHLON.

Next up is the character stealin' Shawn Connolly. ;-)

WEST COAST AVENGERS #114

By Mark Bousquet

I've been looking forward to this issue for a while... because it ties in with X-Force. Heh.

Self-serving comments aside... this issue is real well-written and all, but... yeesh, can't the Whackos get a stable roster... /ever/? :) It's coming, though, I can sense it. The ending is brilliant, the character moments are great, the Captain Merveille subplot is great, and Wonder Man's not whining anymore! YAY!

I hope I've gotten the stable roster just about set. I'll still have people coming and going, but hopefully all the multiple changes are done for a while now. One more, this from Mark Beaulieu:

West Coast Avengers (114) is another fine issue by Bousquet.

I actually prefer stories like this one to big epics like "World Without End." I loved the ending, which I won't spoil for anyone. The way people are leaving this title is shocking. The one I wish had stayed was Sam. He fit in nicely and helped integrate the X-characters into the mainstream MV1 universe. It was something that the real Marvel wouldn't do (I don't think they would anyway).

I love how you write Pietro. I'd like to see you go a little deeper into Tigra's character. Right now she seems a little

too one dimensional (slut).

This is a great series and you should be give it a shot. And if you've read WCA and enjoy it, then try All God's Children, Fantastic Four, Captain America, Inhumans, and Alpha Flight. Did I miss anything there Mark?

Oh and I forgot all about the best part of the book! You gave me a plug! Woo-hoo!! They fight chimpanzees. You bet they do!

In closing, I'd wish that the WCA had been written like this when it was being published.

Baloo

Many thanks, Baloo.

ALSO THIS MONTH: HAWKEYE 18 by Lonni Holland -
The Variable is back, and Hawk has a long delayed dinner with a reporter. Film at 11?

NEXT ISSUE: WCA 116 - Hawkeye and company delve into the mystery of the Enlightenment Foundation.

-- Mark Bousquet ...

26.October.1999

You can join the MV1 Talk list for discussion of MV1 fanfic by going to <http://www.onelist.com/subscribe.cgi/mv1talk> . You have to register with onelist but it's a painless process that generates ZERO spam.

West Coast Avengers 116

AVENGERS ASSEMBLE! - And there came a day ... Hawkeye? Lady Merveille? Wonder Man? Tigra? Quicksilver? Crystal? Cannonball? Falcon? Beta Ray Bill? Jocasta? Bova??? Irving Forbush??? Just who are the WEST COAST AVENGERS?!?!?

MARCH, Y4 MV1 Presents ... Earth's Mightiest Heroes!!! AVENGERS



And there came a day when the foes became too great for Earth's Mightiest to handle alone!

On that day was born the West Coast Avengers!

116 NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS # 116

written by Mark Bousquet

THE WEST COAST AVENGERS GATEFOLD

Previously ... The WCA has returned from Colorado where they found Shape aligned with Arnim Zola and the Enlightenment Foundation, plus they have just returned from the Kree/Shi'ar War.

AVENGERS ROSTER

HAWKEYE - Clint Barton is an expert marksman, sporting a large supply of trick arrows; a former outlaw, he's the WCA's founding Chairman and tied to the WCA more than any other person.

QUICKSILVER - Pietro Maximoff is the twin brother of the Scarlet Witch, son of Magneto, husband to Crystal and father to Luna. He is a mutant possessing the power of acceleration.

LADY MERVEILLE - Monica Rambeau is a former Avengers Chairman, possesses the power to turn her body into any part of the electromagnetic spectrum.

WONDER MAN - Simon Williams became Wonder Man when the Enchantress had his body infused with ionic energy; a strong man with human failings, he struggles to live up to his power

TIGRA - Greer Nelson is a former biologist, changed by the Cat People into a modern version of their greatest warrior of legend

FALCON - former partner of Captain America and devoted social worker; thanks to his costume, Sam possesses the power of flight - **RESERVE**

CRYSTAL - a member of the Royal Family of Attilan, wife of Quicksilver and mother of Luna; can command the elemental forces - **RESERVE**

NON ROSTER CAST OF CHARACTERS

BETA RAY BILL - alien cyborg warrior, adopted of Asgard, Bill wields the Mjolnir-level hammer, Storm Breaker, a gift from Odin

JOCASTA - twisted and tortured by Ultron into becoming the Super-Adaptoid, then forced to face the Avengers who bruised and battered her, Jocasta has come to the WCA in hopes that they can help her regain her form and her sanity

BOVA - the first evolved creature of the High Evolutionary, Bova is an evolved cow that brought Quicksilver into the world; serves as a nanny to Luna

LUNA - the young daughter of the mutant Quicksilver and the Inhuman Crystal, Luna is, as far as anyone can tell, simply human

NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS

SOAK UP THE SUN

written by Mark Bousquet

**** Continuity Note - this story takes place after the KREE/SHI'AR WAR. See the Epic Branch for details.***

WEST COAST AVENGERS COMPOUND

"All right, that's it! I've had it! This ends here and now!"

Hawkeye stood in the middle of the West Coast Avengers Compound, fearing he might explode. Around him stood the various members and hangers on of the West Coast Avengers: Falcon, Quicksilver, Crystal, Luna, Bova, Tigra, Wonder Man, Variable, USAgent, Lady Merveille, Jocasta, Living Lightning, Beta Ray Bill and a new visitor looking for the recently departed Cannonball.* He was half-expecting Shape and Jolt to pop back in at any moment.

**** Cannonball left the team in WCA 114 to track down his ex-girlfriend, Meltdown, and find out why she's on the cover of a men's adult magazine. See XXX-FORCE for details on the Vigilante Branch.***

"This is too freaking much! I've had my ass tossed this way and that way across the galaxy twice now! I'm tired, I'm cranky and I'm down to my last pair of clean socks!" Hawkeye continued to rant, pretending he didn't see the smirk on Tigra's face. "This roster is less stable than Madcap on happy juice. I need answers people. I need to know who's on this blamed roster. I'm not as hung-up on all the by-laws and regulations as I used to be about the roster, okay, but I need to know who's going to be on this roster and who's just visiting?"

Everyone looked at him like he had lost his mind.

"Didn't we just do this scene a couple weeks ago, Haw-?"

"ZIP IT, TIGRA!"

"I didn't mean to start a commotion, Hawkeye," came the soft Irish lilt of the mutant heroine Siryn. "I was just looking for Cannonball. My dad - Banshee - has recently come out of his coma and I was, well, I guess I was looking for someone to talk to about it. Do you happen to know where he went?"

Hawkeye tried not to sigh too loudly. "I can help you look for him in a few minutes, okay, Siryn?"

"Sure thing," she said and quietly moved to the back of the gathering. She caught Tigra looking at her from the other side. The cat woman was running her finger in circles near her ear, giving her the international sign for, "He's crazy."

"Let's start with the obvious," Hawkeye began. "Or at least, what I think is obvious. Bova, you're not signing on for active duty, are you?"

"No, Sir Hawkeye," the evolved cow said quietly. "I hope that's not a problem to me staying here."

Quicksilver snapped, "Of course it's not, dearest Bova. You can stay here-"

"Hey, Pietro," Hawkeye snapped back, "relax. It was a joke." Hawkeye let a grin play out across his face. "Honestly, people, I just need to know if you're an Avenger or if you're just here soaking up the sun. I don't want people to think this is where Avengers go only when it's cold back East."

Quicksilver was about to snap back at Hawkeye, but Crystal put a hand on his shoulder and whispered calming words to him, "Not now, my husband. Let Hawkeye have his fun."

"Agent?"

"I'm sorry," Agent snapped. "I can't believe you called me here for this! I told you I had things to do!"

"Yeah, well," Hawkeye grinned, "consider this payback for announcing your departure to SCN before telling it to me." Without waiting for a response, and trying not to grin too wide, Clint turned his attention to Variable, a new hero that had come to the Avengers during their most recent try-out before deciding Avengers life wasn't for him.* "Variable, what do you say?"

*** In AWC 106 - 107**

"I can't, Hawkeye," Variable shook his head. "I ... I don't think I could put my family through this. Our recent ... encounter* has me convinced that while I need to train and learn how to use my powers, I couldn't stand being away from them. I hope you understand." Variable looked around him, "I actually just stopped by hoping we could, uh, talk about that stuff.**

*** HAWKEYE 16**

**** See HAWKEYE 18 for details**

Clint smiled. Variable was a good man and he'd do whatever he could to help Scott out. "You got it. Just give me a moment."

"Are you going to help him before or after you help Siryn?" Tigra laughed from Clint's left.

"Very funny, Tigra," he grinned back. "I'm guessing you'll be staying, right?"

"You got it, boss!" Tigra said happily. "Unless you keep giving me 'sit in the Quinjet' duty on missions, of course." She smiled when she said it and Clint smiled in return, but Clint gave her a quick nod to let her know he knew that he could've used her better on the last mission.* He'd read her and Monica's mission reports on her role during the time they were after Doom in space** and he was impressed. It was easy to take her for something of a flake but there was no denying she had earned the right to be an Avenger.

*** Last issue**

**** The WORLD WITHOUT saga, WCA 109 - 112**

"Falcon?" Clint asked.

"I'm gone, Clint," Falcon replied. "I came out here to Los Angeles to help a friend, and now that that's done,* I should be returning back east. I've got some things that need looking into."

*** WCA 113, but Sam doesn't know his friend is a member of the Secret Empire.**

"Good enough, Sam, but we liked having you around," Clint thanked. "Pietro? Crystal?"

"I have no intention of leaving," Quicksilver announced, "and see no reason why Crystal can't take her place as a full-time member again."

Crystal sighed, "I'll stay as a reserve, Clint, if that's okay."

"Of course it is."

Pietro looked at his wife, wanting to say something, but not sure what to say. "Crystal, if you don't want to be here, we can-"

Crystal shook her head, constantly amazed how her husband could go from one extreme to the other in the blink of an eye, "No, Pietro. I want to be here, and I'll help out when I can, but ..." She let her voice trail off as she turned to look at the sun glistening off the ocean over the far cliff.

"But what?" Pietro asked, alarm creeping into his voice.

"We'll talk later," Crystal said and turned back. "It's not a big deal, don't worry."

Pietro didn't believe her and looked, to Clint, like he was going to say something. Clint could tell by the look on his face and his own experiences being married that what was going to come out of his mouth was, most likely, going to come out wrong and get him in trouble. He decided to save

him and started talking again before Pietro could get the words out.

"Miguel?" Clint tried not to sound angry when he spoke to the young hero, "You helped out during the Kree/Shi'ar War, but you never showed for our battle against Doom. I take it you want to stay as a reserve?"

Miguel opened his mouth to say, "Sure" and stopped. "I'm sorry, but I can't. My college study is just too important and now that you've got Lady Merveille around, who can do everything I can and more, and better ... I'd really rather just concentrate on my studies. I hope you understand."

Clint nodded. "I do, Miguel, even though I do hope you'll take advantage of Merveille's experience while she's here." Hawkeye rolled his eyes back into his head. "You are going to be here a while, right, Merveille?"

"Yes," Monica Rambeau answered tersely through a forced smile. With her financial troubles back home in New Orleans,* she had to stay to get the full Avengers stipend. Literally, every penny counted.

**** The boating business Monica runs with her father is on the verge of bankruptcy, see the last two issues for full details***

"Excellent. Always good to have a former Chairman on the roster." Hawkeye let his eyes keep moving to the left, "Jocasta?" The female robot took her eyes off Wonder Man where, Hawkeye just realized, they'd been most of the impromptu meeting. She'd regained almost-complete control over her new Super-Adaptoid-ish ability to change shape, and was once again in her familiar form, and Clint noticed, her familiar grey color. What, exactly, her limitations were, Clint meant to find out. "I'm hoping you'll be sticking around for awhile."

"I will be," Jocasta smiled. "I have much to learn."

Clint wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but moved on to the alien/cyborg warrior Beta Ray Bill. Of all here, this was the most interesting person to Hawkeye. He'd aided the team during the Doom affair, and helped out somewhere during the Kree/Shi'ar War, and Clint had to admit it would be nice to have this kind of firepower around - even though he already had Wonder Man and Lady Merveille on the roster. "Beta Ray Bill?" he asked, the moment at hand. "Since you haven't been an Avenger before, we'd need to put this to a vote, but I'd like to invite you to join. Anyone who could wield Mjolnir is certainly Avenger-material."

The alien-cyborg breathed deeply, looking around the gathering. These were good people and, truth be told, he was intrigued about staying. It was something he'd given some thought to in the past few days, drawn, in no small part, to the family/brethren atmosphere. Plus, with his recent involvement with Doom and the Shi'ar, he'd like to keep an eye on the Earth monarch. He met Hawkeye's eye, "If you'd have me, I'd be honor-arrrrrrggghhhh!"

Bill dropped to the ground as thought exploded into his mind, "BILL, THIS ONE NEEDS YOUR ASSISTANCE!!!" Bill picked himself up, the ringing still evident inside his mind, "I've ... I'm sorry, I've got to go! Apparently, old business is not yet finished!" Bill started swinging his enchanted hammer, a move the Avengers had seen from Thor a thousand times before. "Some other time, perhaps. Fare thee well, Avengers!"

Beta Ray Bill flung his hammer into the air and exploded off the ground, vanishing quickly into the sky.

"What the heck was that about?" Clint asked, shaking his head.

"Heck if I know," Tigra answered, shaking her head, "but we'll probably have to go someplace else if we want to hear about it.* No one ever calls, anymore."

**** Um, er, uh, see it's, uh ... just go read DEFENDERS 187 for the NEW LIGHT story, okay?***

"Well, whoever does monitor duty tonight will have to keep an eye out for problems. Simon? I know your acting career is getting back on track, but I hope you'll stay on the team."

Simon Williams smiled, "Of course I will, Clint. Always good for the publicity of my career and my films if I'm on the evening news." Simon stepped out to where everyone could see him. He put on a brave face, but the truth was that as good as he felt emotionally, physically there was something wrong with him. He'd been having fainting spells since returning to Earth. His left wrist itched. Right where Admiral Phyken sliced it off.* "Charlie, that's my director, said I should get a catch slogan. You know, like the wrestlers have? Because it's big with the kids. So I've trademarked my catch phrase and Charlie is going to have me say it in the movie. That way, when the film comes out, we can make some extra cash. How do you like it? The front says, 'MY FISTS HIT AS HARD ...'" Simon turned around, "and the back says ... 'AS THOR'S HAMMER!' Pretty cool, huh?"

*** In WCA 111**

The team, with the exception of Quicksilver, looked at him with bemused smiles they might give a five year old. Pietro couldn't contain himself, "Are you serious?"

"Huh?" Simon's smile vanished as he looked at the mutant speedster. "Sure, I'm serious. It's a great way to make some extra money and a great way to improve my Q rating with the public."

In the back, Variable turned to Siryn and whispered, "Can you believe this? Are all superheroes this crazy?"

Siryn smiled, "Yeah, for the most part. Hey, don't look at me. I was born into this, I didn't have a choice."

"What do you mean?" Variable asked.

"My dad was Banshee."

Variable looked at her with a blank look on his face.

"He's an old member of the X-Men," she explained patiently.

"So you grew up with the X-Men?"

"Oh, no. My dad thought my mum and me had died. I was raised by my Uncle Tom."

Variable began to think Siryn was crazier than all of them put together, "And when you learned who your dad was you decided to take up the fight against," he couldn't believe he was speaking these words, "evil?"

Siryn smiled, enjoying the look on Variable's face as she told the story, "No, my uncle is a super villain, Black Tom Cassidy. He raised me to steal. It wasn't until I was older that I realized what I was doing was wrong."

Variable shook his head, "I've got to get out of here."

EARTH ORBIT - LIGHTHOUSE

Havok stood on the bridge of Lighthouse, a large space station in Earth orbit, invisible to the world below. Various members of his crew milled about their stations, performing their duties.

"I'm telling you, he'll never go for it," John Jameson spoke to Havok. "He's not the kind of guy who'll leave Earth and live in space."

"You're wrong, John," Havok said confidently. "I'm very certain that I can persuade him to join with us. When he sees the good he can do, and the responsibilities he'll have, and the power he'll be given to effect real change ..."

"Five bucks says there's no way he'll agree."

"I don't want your money, John," Havok dead-panned as he turned to look out at space across the large floor of the

metal bridge. "I'm more interested in making you eat your words."

BEVERLY HILLS, CALIFORNIA

Slyde looked around the room in disbelief. How a common street villain ever found his way into a mansion like this ... unbelievable.

"Brother Slyde, don't you ever take off your costume?" Slyde turned to see a beautiful woman coming to him with a tray of fruit. She sat down next to him on a plush couch, completely at home inside the mansion's opulence.

"Um, no, actually," Slyde said, somewhat nervously. "At least, I try not to." His life had been strange the past few months, since a man, seemingly at random, handed him a card for the Enlightenment Foundation that read

THE ENLIGHTENMENT FOUNDATION

Prepare for the End

At first, there was nothing but the card and Slyde had all but forgotten about it, but then later another man handed him a different card. This one read ...

THE ENLIGHTENMENT FOUNDATION

... this is the way to the light ...

The next time he went out to commit a crime, he'd found a group of men, dressed in robes, waiting for him as he escaped from the Taco Bell with almost 200 bucks in cash and a few Chalupas. They took him to a run down place on the outskirts of where he met more of the Brothers.

Without asking for anything in return, they offered him food, water, a place to stay and a decent living to earn, living in a house overlooking the city. He was nervous at first, unsure of what they wanted in return, but it became apparent that they didn't want anything.

Slyde had found a home with the Brothers here in the Enlightenment Foundation. They helped him when he

needed help and didn't ask for anything in return. But even more, to him, they accepted him for who he was. When he stole and was caught,* they bailed him out of jail.** And always, they opened their doors to him. There were men and women from all walks of life: accountants, cashiers, prostitutes, car salesmen, college students ... all living together, some 24 hours a day, some only a few nights a week, trying to make each other better people.

*** WCA 107**

**** WCA 110**

But this ... he looked to the woman and at the room ... this was all too much. There was a new Brother, this one a Hollywood actor who lived here in Beverly Hills. He'd opened his home to them and offered them whatever they wanted. He was shooting a movie in France at the moment and the 20 Brothers that made up this branch of the EF had full run of the place.

It was almost perfect. Almost everything he'd ever wanted. Almost.

He had to get away.

"Hey!" the woman yelled after him as he took off from the room and down the hallway.

AVENGERS COMPOUND

"Take care, Clint," Falcon extended his hand. "It's been fun. I didn't expect to end up fighting Dr. Doom half way across the galaxy when I came out here, but I'm glad I was able to help."

"Thanks, Sam," Clint shook Falcon's hand. "It was good to see you. Good to have you Avenging, again."

"I'll admit, I've never been a huge fan of joining groups. I always thought I got lost in the shuffle and that I was better serving the world staying solo and on street level. I'd rather

let you guys save the planet, I just want to save the neighborhood."

"Yeah, but that's no reason not to join a group," Hawkeye countered. "Maybe the Avengers are the wrong group to do the kind of work you want, but that doesn't mean there isn't one out there."

"If there is," Sam smiled, "I haven't found it. Still, though, seeing what Councilman Proctor is doing with his Helping Hands charity ... and seeing what happened before I came out here,* maybe I could try to effect change on a wider scale. I don't know what my next step will be."

**** Sam was given \$250,000 from an anonymous source in CAPTAIN AMERICA 484***

"Whatever it is, I wish you the best."

"Thanks, Clint. I'll see you around."

He watched Sam walk down the hallway and then Hawkeye turned around to check out the monitors. He'd promised Siryn he'd help her find Cannonball, and even though she wasn't here, it wouldn't hurt to start.

The team had scattered throughout the Compound, but he still wanted them on full alert. If there was something that they could get involved in tonight, he wanted the newly minted roster to go out and take the threat down so the public would know who was on the team.

Still, he was hoping Variable or Living Lightning would stick around, or Jolt or Cannonball would come walking back in, so there was a new Avenger to train. Clint honestly believed that part of the Avengers job was to train the next generation of heroes.

He frowned, really hoping Cannonball had been able to last, though he understood why the young mutant had left. But ... the X-Men and X-Force were taking more steps out into the open these days. Some of it because that new cable

network, SCN, needed programming but a lot of it because they chose to step out. Heck, Xavier was going so far as to announce his candidacy for public office. Having Cannonball on the team would help them out, in some small way, maybe. The Avengers had had mutants on the roster since the first line-up shake-up* and public polls had shown that people often looked more favorably on mutants when they were associated with the Avengers. They couldn't single-handedly solve the bigotry in this country, but Clint knew they could make some kind of dent. 'If only Sam had stuck-'

*** AVENGERS 16**

"Any luck finding Cannonball?"

Hawkeye turned from his thoughts to the door to see the mutant heroine Siryn enter.

He smiled. It was too easy.

"Siryn, Siryn, Siryn, have I got an offer for you."

THE BUNGALOW OF QUICKSILVER and CRYSTAL

Pietro and Crystal stood in the kitchen area of their bungalow, unsure where to start the conversation. Behind them they could turn to see Bova and Luna playing in the grass. Crystal turned to look at her husband, loving him more, it seemed, with every passing day. The troubled mind that had once bothered her now fascinated her, every glimpse she got of it, every insight that came to her drew her closer to him.

He was a difficult man to love, there was no doubting it, but, she thought, love was worth it.

She only wished she could make it through this conversation.

"Crystal," Pietro began, "I am sorry for telling Hawkeye to make you a full member of the team, but I ... well, I had no idea that you didn't want to be here."

"But, Pietro," Crystal answered softly, "I do want to be here. I thought you knew that."

Pietro turned away, his eyes finding Luna in the grass. "I ... worry ... when you are not active, Crystal." Crystal's eyes popped open at the admission. "You are ... not a ... not a cold woman, Crystal. You are warm-blooded, you like action and excitement. Being a mother ... you are good at it, don't misunderstand me, but I wonder if being a mother provides you with the ... excitement you ... need."

Crystal took the half-step to her husband, "You worry that if I sit at home, alone, that I'll go looking for adventure to replace what I miss by not being with the team?"

Pietro swallowed hard, "Yes."

"Look at me, my husband. There is something you must know. Something that should calm your fears about me being home and having free time on my hands." Slowly, Pietro turned. Crystal opened her arms and smiled a smile so radiant Pietro felt his heart skip a beat. Crystal took a deep breath and just a slight look of doubt crept onto her face. There was no turning back. "We're having another child. I'm pregnant."

INFANTINO TOWER

The Falcon soared out an open window of Infantino Tower, having just said his good-byes to his friend, the Councilman Michael Proctor. His business here in LA was done and he could get back to the East Coast now and figure out just who it was that left \$250,000 in cash at his apartment.

He arced over the city skyline, heading to LAX, where his flight back home would be waiting for him. Clint had offered to let him take a Quinjet, but Sam declined. Nothing wrong with conventional flight every now and then. 'Besides- huh, what's he doing?"

To his left, Sam could see the former X-Man Havok waving to him from atop a skyscraper. He descended.

"Havok," he nodded, landing gently on the roof. "Need help with something?"

"Just looking for you," Havok answered solemnly, putting Sam momentarily on edge. "I have an offer to make you. I'm forming a ... team, and I'd like you to be a part of it."

"I'm not really interested, to be honest," Falcon answered. "I've always been more of a solo hero."

"What are you doing to do with the \$250,000 you found at your apartment?"

"What?" Falcon asked, now definitely on edge. "How do you know-?"

"I put it there."

"What? Why?"

"To enact change. Real change. I'm tired, Falcon, of punching bad-guys and having nothing come of it. I'm tired of facing the same world-threatening threats over and over while real problems that we could help with are ignored because there isn't some mad villain behind it."

Falcon couldn't help but act interested, "And this team you're forming is going to do that? How?"

Havok let himself smile, "We have a way. Care to see our headquarters? I guarantee that if you join with us, you'll have money to bring about the kinds of changes you want to see."

"Okay," Falcon nodded, "I'm curious enough to hear you out. Where's your headquarters?"

Havok pointed up.

"In the clouds?"

Alex Summers smiled, "No, higher. Much, much higher."

Be sure to check out Lighthouse: Little Green Men to follow the Falcon's story. You can find it on the Epic Branch.

THE BUNGALOW OF WONDER MAN

"Come on, Simon, whattya say, once for old times?"

Simon looked at Tigra with a bemused smile on his face, "Come on, Tigra, not now. I've got lines to study."

"Oh come one, you know it wouldn't take you too long ..." she raised her eyebrows and approached Simon with her best sexy strut. "It's been so long for me ... I hate sleeping in a cold bed ..."

Simon crossed his arms in front of his chest. "No, Tigra. No."

"Come on, big guy. You know you want-"

"I said No!" he exploded suddenly and Tigra jumped back involuntarily. "Damnit, Tigra, this acting gig is important to me! The rest of you love being Avengers but I've never really felt comfortable here and you all know it! So take your come hither looks, your fur and your blasted tail and hit the road!"

"Fine, then!" Tigra stomped and stormed out of the room.

"God!" Wonder Man screamed, turning quickly to grab his script. The room spun and he had to extend his arm to stop himself from falling. 'What the hell is wrong with me?' he thought to himself worriedly. 'Why am I fainting all the time? Why do I feel so weak?' Shaking his head, he walked to the bathroom to look at himself in the mirror, 'Am I losing weight?'

And the entire time he asked himself these questions, his left wrist burned and burned and burned.

Outside the bungalow, Tigra stewed. 'What's his problem?' She walked through the Compound's grounds for a while, not thinking of anything, no destination in mind. She ended up at the beach and started thinking in ways she usually rejected, but now welcomed.

'I hate thinking like this,' she frowned as she sat down in the warm sand. 'I'm supposed to live for the moment, not caring about what other people think or about what I've done in the past. But,' her eyes danced over the rolling waves of the Pacific Ocean, 'that's the cat part of me talking. There's a human side in here, too. A side that maybe I've rejected for too long. Blah!' she kicked at the sand angrily. 'What do I care if others think I'm a flake? Why do I care if-'

BEEP! BEEP!

Her Avengers Communicard (about the only item she could carry in her bikini outfit) beeped to life and she looked down to see Hawkeye staring back at her.

"All Avengers report to the Hangar immediately! Los Angeles is under attack. I want all full-time members only!"

"Saved by the bell!" Tigra jumped up happily, thrilled to put the reflective thoughts behind her and engage the present full-on again. She even happily ignored the buzzing in the back of her mind that told her this conversation wasn't yet over.

HELPING HANDS COMMUNITY CENTER

The Quinjet landed in the street and the Avengers: Hawkeye, Wonder Man, Lady Merveille, Tigra and Quicksilver exited the craft. A group of onlookers came rushing over. Clint noticed with some amazement that a SCN van was already pulling up.

"You've got to help us, man!" a woman cried as she stood in Hawkeye's face. "There's a crazy guy in there and he's got our kids hostage!"

"Who is it, ma'am?" Hawkeye asked, the panic in the woman's voice tugging at his heart. The loss of children weighed heavily on the Archer's soul. "We got a report that it was a super-powered criminal, but LAPD was unable to tell us who it was."

"That's cause LAPD is a bunch of dumb motherfu-"

"I'm sure they are," Hawkeye snapped at the young man in the back, "but right now I'm not interested in debating their ineptness. He turned around to the Avengers, "Merveille, Quicksilver, would you do the honors?"

"I'll take the interior," Monica nodded to Pietro, "you take the perimeter."

Quicksilver nodded and they were off in a flash. A few seconds later, Pietro returned, but Merveille was nowhere to be seen. Clint waited a few moments, growing impatient. He wanted this to come off well for the community, to show that-

The door to the community center opened and Merveille walked out with Slyde in front of her. "I didn't know there were kids in there, I swear!" he yelled.

"Sure," Monica answered. "Tell it to the judge."

Slyde panicked and tried to escape down the side of the building, leaving a momentarily startled Merveille in his wake. It was stupid and he knew it, there was no way he could outrun Quicksilver, let alone Merveille, but he had to try.

"Aaaaaarrggghhh!" he screamed, his hands coming up to protect his ears. It felt like his head was going to split in two.

"Hold it right there, Slyde. I'm sure the Avengers would like a word with you," came a voice from above.

"That's right, we would!" Hawkeye yelled, dropping a weighted net over Slyde's head to keep him from escaping. "Seems like we've danced this dance before, Slyde."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I give up. Take me away."

"Hawkeye! Cameron Showlers from SCN here!" Clint and the Avengers turned around to see a young female reporter and a camera rushing towards them. "Have you apprehended the villain? Is this the new Avengers line-up?"

Hawkeye waited for the cameraman to come to a halt. He wanted this shot to look good. "Yes on both accounts, Cameron," Hawkeye smiled. "Turns out we didn't need the full complement to nab Slyde here, but we didn't know what we were walking into. And yes, this is the new West Coast Avengers line-up. Let me introduce you and the world to one of the finest Avengers line-ups in history!"

Tigra and Merveille exchanged raised eye-brows, but let Hawkeye indulge in his hype.

"Besides myself, we've got long time Avengers Lady Merveille, Wonder Man, Tigra and Quicksilver. Plus our newest addition ..." he waited for the Irish mutant to drop to the pavement, "Siryn!"

Cameron looked at Hawkeye, waiting. Finally, she realized he wasn't going to say it. "Couldn't you say it? I know it's really not the moment, but it'd look great. Please."

"Sure," Hawkeye grinned. "On three, everyone. One, two, three! ...AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!" Hawkeye turned around to see five smiling faces, "Hey, how come I was the only one who yelled it?"

"Sorry, Cameron," Lady Merveille spoke up, smiling. "We might not be the most vocal Avengers of all-time, but we'll be there when it counts."

The Avengers started to walk back to the Quinjet, leaving Hawkeye scratching his head. "Yeah, but it's still fun to say, right guys? Guys? Come on, hey, wait up!"

END WCA 116

NEXT ISSUE: THE MASTERS OF EVIL WAR explodes into the pages of WCA! Spilling over from the pages of CHAMPIONS, it's not one, but TWO Masters of Evil running loose and the WCA is caught in the middle!

WEST COAST LINES

Comments c/o mariner2@tiac.net

Okay, the roster has been a bit out of control. Starting with this issue, however, things should be settled down enough to get some stability in the ranks. I've got most of the cast I want to work with now and I take some satisfaction in the fact that I didn't just write people out with no reasons. I tried to create realistic reasons for their departure. Things should be settled now, for a little bit, though you know Clint, if he can improve his team, he will. He is still looking for a scientist, remember ...

On to the letters ...

Wow, I didn't know that getting up so early would get me "first look" at so much cool stuff. Not that it's gonna make me start setting my alarm clock earlier, but, y'know...

Anyways! WCA #115. What to say, what to say...

I like it. "You're looking pleasantly non-psychotic today..." Hee hee! MBQ has a wonderful gift for picking just the right word at the right time, and it shows here.

In fact, it's more like the right /plot/ at the right time... The En... oh, wait. No spoilers. Well, the group that the Whackos are involved with at the moment... it's not only interesting as all get-out, it's also timely. Read it, you'll see why.

Oh, and Tigra's question about the Shape's speech patterns was another priceless gem. Thought I'd mention that.

In short, I'm giving WCA #115 4 out of 5 stars. It's an excellent issue, but it's also a setup issue, and it kinda shows a bit.

Oh, and one more thing. Wonder Man's STILL not whining! YAY!

-Shawn Connolly-

Thanks, Shawn. Shape, Slyde and the Enlightenment Foundation will play a big role in this

title as I move along.

Mark,

I've been enjoying your run on AWC a lot. I think you've got every single character nailed (even if I don't like the Tigra's character, you still got it right) and the close ties with the Hawkeye books make it that much more enjoyable.

I would've liked to see Agent stay, but I suppose it was inevitable and the way it was done was Grade A Agent.

The latest issue didn't have any fights yet it wasn't a flat-out characterization issue either. I haven't seen much of that, but you pulled it off nicely.

I really like the Monica Rambeau sub-plot (I won't call her Lady Merveille and I don't think anyone else should either...). That last line about the Heroes for Hire, very intriguing.

Great work Mark,
Adam Di Stefano

Thanks, Adam. There hasn't been much action in the book since the WORLD WITHOUT storyline, but I've tried to really get these characters where I want them. Now that I have, things will pick up in intensity.

West Coast Avengers #115 by Mark Bousquet:
Need I say it? I liked it. I liked it a lot. Just like last issue, I prefer these less cosmic stories. I really like Mark's characterization and the subplots he has flying around. I have no idea where he's going with Jocasta, but I'm looking forward to watching it unfold. The discussion on Shape's dialogue was great. I just hope it wasn't a playful jab at how I write Hercules (of course I think that Herc would speak old English incorrectly, so that's my defense <g>). I doubt that Zola is on the up and up, but if he is that's a great plot twist.

-- Mark Beaulieu

Thanks, Baloo.

ALSO SEE: CHAMPIONS 36 by Mark Beaulieu for the kick-off of a Champions classic, the MASTERS OF EVIL WAR!!! And then in HAWKEYE 19 someone's after the Avenging Archer! Written by Lonni Holland!

-- Mark Bousquet ... 24.November.1999

You can join the MV1 Talk list for discussion of MV1 fanfic by going to <http://www.onelist.com/subscribe.cgi/mv1talk> . You have to register with onelist but it's a painless process that generates ZERO spam.

West Coast Avengers 117

***AVENGERS ASSEMBLE! - And there came a day ...
Hawkeye! Quicksilver! Crystal! Lady Merveille!
Wonder Man! Tigra! Siryn! Earth's Mightiest! These
are the WEST COAST AVENGERS!!!***

**APRIL, Y4 MV1 Presents ... Earth's Mightiest
Heroes!!! AVENGERS**



***And there came a day when the foes became too
great for Earth's Mightiest to handle alone!***

On that day was born the West Coast Avengers!

117 NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS # 117

MASTERS OF EVIL WAR, PART 3

SEARCHING FOR HAWKEYE

written by Mark Bousquet

THE WEST COAST AVENGERS GATEFOLD

**Previously ... Siryn has joined the ranks of the WCA
as Beta Ray Bill departed for parts unknown. Crystal
told Pietro that they were going to have a second
child. Wonder Man's acting career has kicked into**

gear, with a small role playing Pluto, the Greek God of the Underworld, but he's continued to be plagued by fainting spells. Merveille's family faces financial ruin as their boating business is close to bankruptcy.

AVENGERS ROSTER

HAWKEYE - Clint Barton is an expert marksman, sporting a large supply of trick arrows; a former outlaw, he's the WCA's founding Chairman and tied to the WCA more than any other person.

QUICKSILVER - Pietro Maximoff is the twin brother of the Scarlet Witch, son of Magneto, husband to Crystal and father to Luna. He is a mutant possessing the power of acceleration.

LADY MERVEILLE - Monica Rambeau is a former Avengers Chairman, possesses the power to turn her body into any part of the electromagnetic spectrum.

WONDER MAN - Simon Williams became Wonder Man when the Enchantress had his body infused with ionic energy; a strong man with human failings, he struggles to live up to his power

TIGRA - Greer Nelson is a former biologist, changed by the Cat People into a modern version of their greatest warrior of legend

CRYSTAL - a member of the Royal Family of Attilan, wife of Quicksilver and mother of Luna; can command the elemental forces - **RESERVE**

SIRYN - Theresa Cassidy, daughter of Banshee, recently joined the WCA following her father's recovery from a coma; powers are similar to Banshee's; former leader of X-Force

NON ROSTER CAST OF CHARACTERS

JOCASTA - twisted and tortured by Ultron into becoming the Super-Adaptoid, then forced to face the Avengers who bruised and battered her, Jocasta has come to the WCA in hopes that they can help her regain her form and her sanity

BOVA - the first evolved creature of the High Evolutionary, Bova is an evolved cow that brought Quicksilver into the world; serves as a nanny to Luna
LUNA - the young daughter of the mutant Quicksilver and the Inhuman Crystal, Luna is, as far as anyone can tell, simply human

MASTERS OF EVIL ROLL CALL

BARON ZEMO'S MoE: Baron Zemo, Techno, Eidolon, Kreature, Vespide, Suicide Selia

CRIMSON COWL'S MoE: Crimson Cowl, Cyclone, Flying Tiger, Tiger Shark, Mankiller, War Toy

NORTHERN BEAR PRODUCTIONS

** Continuity Note - this story takes place after the first two parts of the Masters of Evil War, in Champions 36 and Hawkeye 19 - you don't need to read them to understand this issue, but if you don't you're missing the first half of the MOE War! Check them out at the Avengers Branch.*

What You Need To Know ... There's one Masters of Evil too many and Zemo is determined to make sure only a Zemo leads the MOE. Crimson Cowl's MoE has kidnapped and tortured Hawkeye, though he received a surprise reprieve when War Toy saved him from death at the hands of Mankiller.

CRIMSON COWL'S HEADQUARTERS

Hawkeye tried to convince himself that what he just lived through was a dream of some kind. Not the pounding he took at the hands of Crimson Cowl's Masters of Evil, the pain in his ribs made certain he knew that was real, but ... but what the hell did War Toy just do?*

** See **HAWKEYE 19** for details - or just keep reading*

He'd been being beat to death by Mankiller and Tiger Shark, trying to lip off as much as possible to give him every

extra second, when War Toy came in, rescued him and then brought him to this room to rest in peace.

'Not to mention cleaning me up and wrapping this bandage around my ribs,' Hawkeye thought, wondering when the punch-line would hit him. 'The roof's probably booby-trapped, or the floor. Yeah, most likely the floor.'

He could hear the sound of battle outside, but he couldn't yet move to go see what was going on. But he could guess - the West Coast Avengers had arrived.

'Ugh,' Clint groaned, fearing a rib was broken. 'Let's hope the day starts getting better right now.'

WEST COAST AVENGERS COMPOUND THE BUNGALOW OF QUICKSILVER AND CRYSTAL SEVEN HOURS AGO

The day started simply enough for the mutant hero and long-time Avenger known as Quicksilver.

He rose, early, as he always did, and completed the day's errands before his wife, his daughter or their nanny had risen from bed, leaving to Bova certain chores that he knew she'd be disappointed if he didn't allow her to complete. One of the difficult things, he'd learned, about having super speed was the compulsion to do everything for everyone.

Luckily, Pietro Maximoff compensated for this by being egotistical, brooding and self-centered.

But for the three people he loved most in his life, his wife Crystal, his daughter Luna and Bova, the evolved cow who not only brought Pietro and his sister Wanda into the world, but also helped raise Luna, he would do anything. And now, there'd be a fourth member of this travelling family because Crystal was once again pregnant.*

**** As revealed last issue***

He had spent most of the time since Crystal had informed him of her condition thinking about it. Another child wasn't

something he was expecting, but it wasn't something that he was displeased with, either. Since being reunited with Crystal following her time in the universe created by Franklin Richards,* things had been better than they ever had between them.

*** *Back in Fantastic Four* 419**

His hands rapidly cracked eighteen eggs and deposited the innards into a large bowl, where he proceeded to stir them together with a helping of milk in seconds. Bova liked to cook the morning's breakfast, as well, but with her large hands it could take her an unbearable amount of time to make a meal big enough to satiate Pietro's rapid metabolism. And heaven forbid she dropped part of an egg shell into the concoction ...

It was better to make the meal himself and then eat a few simply prepared slices of toast with the rest of his family.

He poured the obscene amount of stirred egg and milk onto a specially made large skillet, pleased with the sounds of the batter crackling as it hit the hot surface. He placed the bowl back down on the counter and sighed. Now came the excruciating part, waiting the few minutes it took to cook the scrambled eggs.

Pietro sighed. Again. He could only do his activities as fast as the rest of the world let him. No matter how fast he could stir the eggs and milk, he still had to wait for the oven to do the cooking. It was one of the reasons he favored scrambled eggs for breakfast, however, as the cooking time was considerably less than most any other morning meals. Oatmeal was fine when it was cold out, but Pietro couldn't stomach it in hot weather.

Sighing again - a sound so common that to Crystal it never even registered anymore - Pietro flipped on the small television that sat on the counter. He didn't like having television in the house, but Luna did and Crystal agreed with

her, so they had it. At least having it he could control some of what she watched and teach her the trappings of it's programming. Even Bova, Pietro found to much surprise, was rather found of the device, with an almost morbid fascination with something called the Home and Garden Network. Pietro thought television's entertainment often childish and it's so-called news so slanted that he couldn't watch it without leaving the room in anger.

This morning, however, he was glad they had one in the house. He had no favorite channel, so he simply let whatever channel the television was set to greet him. Bova, who often watched the television in the kitchen late at night as she enjoyed a late snack of lettuce or spinach, had been watching something called the Super Channel Network. 'Those insufferable buffoons that treat us as entertainment,' Pietro scoffed, stirring the batter in the skillet.

"-- no reaction from the White House as of yet this morning, but the grounds are buzzing with activity and rumor. SCN has learned from a source deep inside the White House that they were taken completely by surprise by this treaty. Once again, for those just joining us, the Canadian government has signed a treaty with the controversial mutant Magneto--"

"What?!?" Pietro exploded, all thoughts of scrambled eggs vanishing from his mind.

"-- that has sent shockwaves across the world similar to the Electro Magnetic Pulse he once used to disrupt the world's electronics.* The Magnus Accord is shockingly simple and we turn to SCN's expert on superhuman affairs, Raymond Sikorsky. Raymond?"

*** See the Bloodties storyline from pre-MV1 continuity**

"Thank you, Trish," Raymond Sikorsky nodded, fixing his glasses. "The Magnus Accord, from what we've been told, is

a one-for-one trade-off between the two parties. Magneto receives a large plot of land in northern Quebec known as the Valley of Chance in exchange for offering his services to protect Canada from international threats. Inside the Valley of Chance, which will be renamed the Magneto Territories, Magneto will create a haven for mutants to come and live in peace with each other. Unlike previous attempts of his, however, this new haven will be made up entirely of so-called 'normal' or 'zeta' mutants."

"Zeta Mutants, Raymond?" Trish Tilby asked, though Pietro knew she knew full well the answer.

"Low level mutants, Trish," Raymond answered. "Almost all of the press about homo-sapien superior centers around those with dangerous or exotic powers, but believe it or not, there are many mutants out there who have powers that are quite harmless or even downright useless."

"Such as?" she led him forward.

"Things like, being able to count all the words on a page just by looking at it, or levitating one inch off the ground, or being able to change your eye color, or having the ability to-

"Thank you, Raymond. I think we get the point."

"Right, sorry," he coughed, straightening his poor posture in the chair. "Magneto will serve as the ruler of these Territories, but they will follow Canadian law."

"What is Magneto's angle in all this, Raymond?" Trish asked, not being able to keep her biting doubts about Magneto in check.

"That, Trish, is what everyone is asking and no one knows."

"I'm sure it is something that will work in his one-sided favor!" Pietro snapped at the television. Magneto was a hot

topic among all mutants, but especially for Pietro as Magneto was his father.

"You shouldn't yell at the television, honey," Crystal smiled from the doorway. "And by the way, your eggs are burning."

Quicksilver looked from the turmoil of the television to the beauty of his wife to the horror of his burning eggs. And the day had started so peacefully, too, he sighed to himself. He looked at the burned eggs he would never eat. "Where's Lockjaw when you need him?"

INVADERS CAFE

PRESENT

Lady Merveille touched down at the Invaders Café, the first place Hawkeye's transmitter beacon had broadcast from. The rest of the team was following the beacon's current location - somewhere up the coast - but she wanted to come here and check out the scene to see if she could learn just who they were up against.

The place was a mess. The Café's outside tables were overturned and some were scorched. Monica looked for any sign of evidence, but none could be found. It had taken her too long to let the team know what she wanted them to do before she headed here and the cops that stood off to the side looked like they had already combed the area.

"Lady Merveille? Hi, I'm Gayle Rogers," came a voice to Monica's left. She turned and shook her hand.

"The SCN reporter, correct? Sorry, we won't be issuing a statement right-"

"I'm not interested in any damn statement!" she whispered harshly and Monica noticed for the first time that the woman looked a little shaken. "Hawkeye thought he was here to meet me, but I never called him.* From what the

folks inside tell me, it was a set-up. He was ambushed and they took him out."**

*** *It was a trick of Crimson Cowl's MoE in CHAMPIONS 36***

**** See HAWKEYE 19**

"Then why, and forgive me for asking, are you here if you had no idea that Hawkeye was supposedly meeting you here?"

"I use this place for interviews every so often," she confided, sounding a little depressed. "They've got the most wonderful pastry deserts," her voice trailed off. Monica looked at the woman carefully, from what she knew of Gayle she wasn't a soft woman. So why was this bothering her so much? She didn't have feelings for Clint, did she?

"Here's a list, from what I can tell by talking to the witnesses, of the villains that jumped him," Gayle offered Monica a piece of paper, which she took. "I'm sorry, but I have to be going. It's more than a little unnerving to think that I've been being watched by a group of crazy villains."

Monica nodded, still wondering if she was being played by a veteran reporter, and looked down at the piece of paper. In scribbled handwriting, it read,

"Cowlie" - leader, prob. Crimson Cowl

Big tough man-looking woman - no idea

Some French speedster - not Whirlwind

Two "tigers" - sounds like Tiger Shark and Flying Tiger

But it was the last name on the list that made Monica pause.

WAR TOY!

ASSEMBLY ROOM

FIVE HOURS AGO

WONDER MAN

Quicksilver was the only one of us not sitting. The rest of the Whackos sat in their seats around the table: Hawkeye, Lady Merveille, Tigra, Crystal, Jocasta and Siryn. I'd taken the seat next to Siryn - not because she was this beautiful young woman with the most pleasing Irish accent or anything. That's just the way the seating worked out. Honest. It wasn't because Crystal was married, Monica was too serious, Jocasta was a robot and Tigra was upset with me. Really. Pietro tried to keep himself at the world's pace, but he found it difficult to do so when he was upset or troubled. Which he certainly was now.

"A treaty with Magneto of all people!" he raged, forcing himself to stand in one spot.

"Well, Pietro, what do you want us to do about it?" I asked, trying to keep my own anger in check. I had to be on the set of my new film in an hour - I didn't want this dragging out all morning. Especially with these weird fainting spells I've been having since we got back from that battle with Dr. Doom.* It was tough enough having a film career and being an Avenger at the same time with all the craziness that got thrown at us, I didn't need to be late because Pietro was throwing a fit.

**** See the last few issues***

"Don't act so casual, Wonder Man!" he snapped at me, raising my own temperature a notch. "You know well that if - that when - Magneto turns sour we will likely be the ones to be called in to save everyone!"

"Hey, I heard Alpha Flight is back in business," Tigra needled Pietro as she looked casually down at her claws, trying to show how disinterested she was in all this. Strange girl. Never could figure her out, even when we were ... well, when we were whatever it is we were. Man, why do I spend so much time thinking below my waist? At least Wanda isn't around so I don't have to think of her anywhere but my

dreams.* "And then there's the X-Men. We're probably third on the list-"

**** Simon has spent the better part of the first 3 years of MV1 moping and pining for Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch.***

"Don't mock me, woman!" Pietro pounded his fist on the table and, for the first time, really, I think we all realized that this wasn't just the usual Pietro-is-angry routine. He was genuinely, all-out upset.

"Okay, okay, Pietro, calm down," Hawkeye said, standing up. Good job, Clint, you deal with this crazy loon. "There's not much we can do. I've been on the horn all morning the East Coast team and the government and everyone I talk to says there's nothing we can do about it. We've got to play this cool and see what happens. No, don't say it, I know you're not happy with this. I know you can give us a list of reasons a mile long why this won't work, but there's nothing we can do."

The room is tense and Tigra seems unwilling to make one of her casual jokes, so I guess it's up to me.

"Poor Siryn. Joins up with the Avengers and the first crisis we stumble into is one of the X-Men's villains," I wanted to smile, but it was a good thing I didn't 'cause no one smiled back. I tried to lose the edge in my voice, but it didn't happen.

"Magneto is the world's villain!" Pietro admonished me and for a second I thought I might see him spontaneously combust. I was honestly surprised there wasn't steam pouring out of his ears.

"Yeah, but he's your father," I accused for no good reason. It was so easy to let Pietro get under your skin.

I didn't even see the punch. Didn't even realize I was hit until I crashed into the wall. "That does it," I stood and fell back down as another blow knocked me back.

"That's enough!" Hawkeye boomed and me and Pietro stopped but the look that passed between us said that we knew this wasn't over. "Pietro, we're all concerned about this, but what do you want me to do? Take the team there and take him out? I don't want to start a war with Canada, for Chrissakes! Besides, Magneto is ... well, he's Magneto. Even with all the firepower we've got we can't guarantee victory. Best we can do is keep an eye on him and be ready if he screws up."

Pietro said nothing for a few seconds. "I'm going to go pay him a visit. If you want to order me not to go you can accept my resignation effective immediately."

"Well, geez, don't be so dramatic," Clint snapped, by the look on his face harder than he wanted to. "I'm not going to order you not to go. He's your father. Of course you can go."

"I'll need someone to accompany me," he said, his eyes looking to Crystal. Never understood what a woman like that saw in this guy.

"Take anyone here you like, Pietro," Hawkeye offered for the rest of us.

"That's just the problem," Quicksilver turned back to look at Clint, "there's no one here I want to take."

Wha -?!?

#%^*ing Jerk.

AVENGERS QUINJET

PRESENT

SIRYN

Wonder Man was flying and no one sat at the controls next to him. Pietro was clearly mad at him - of course, as he paced around the Quinjet, it looked like he was mad at everyone - and Tigra was giving him the cold shoulder. I was going to sit there, but Tigra told me not to. If I'd known her better I would've challenged her, but I figure she's got her

reasons. Just so long as she doesn't try to treat me as some stupid rookie. I've been doing this my whole life, it feels like.

Seems odd being here. Me, an Avenger? Sometimes the most pleasant surprises come out of the blue. I don't know why exactly Hawkeye offered me a position on this team,* but I wasn't going to say No. Heck, if Dani can hang out with the Avengers back east and Cannonball had plans to be here ... why not? It should give my dad a jolt if nothing else.** They never asked *him* to join the Avengers, after all. The thought makes me smile.

*** *Last issue***

**** *Siryn's dad is the former X-Man Banshee***

Lady Merveille entered the Quinjet's cabin then, phasing right through the ship's hull. This woman is unbelievable. According to the Compound's computers, she can assume any form of energy up and down the electromagnetic spectrum. Read one report where she traveled to meet some spaceship called the Sanctuary II out beyond the orbit of Pluto!* Must be fun to be able to swing by Jupiter on your day off.

****That particular sub-plot started back in AVENGERS 252***

She led the Avengers for a short while, too, after that, but she doesn't seem to have a problem taking orders from Hawkeye. I talked with her and Clint after the meeting this morning and she wanted to discuss her finances with him. I didn't know Avengers got paid! And \$1000 a week, no less, for full-time members. Like it wasn't enough to get to live in this gorgeous Compound or back east in Avengers Mansion, you actually got paid to do it! Unbelievable. No wonder everyone wants to sign up with these guys.

Merveille had told Hawk- Clint, he said to call him - had told Clint that she needed a cover. She couldn't just be handed a \$1000 check every week from the Maria Stark

Foundation, so they worked up a cover where she was hired to be a "Stark Foundation Roving Security Consultant". Never really thought about it, but I guess you do need some kind of cover if you're getting paid to do this - can't really put "superhero" on your tax form.

"Find anything?" Tigra asked her. Man, I bet Sam couldn't keep his eye off that furry tail. Poor guy. Wonder if they ever ... nah, not Sam. Probably would've done him some good, though. Maybe it would've stopped him from running off after Tabitha like some missionary trying to tame the 'savages' that happened to be doing just fine, thanks.* Accept her for who she is, Sam, or you'll just end up hurting the both of you.

**** Happened in WCA 114***

"Looks like the Masters of Evil are back putting their noses in our business," Merveille announced. From what I gather, we're looking at a Crimson Cowl-led team, featuring Mankiller, Tiger Shark, Flying Tiger, Cyclone and-

"Geez, anyone tough? Why couldn't Clint take them himself?" Wonder Man wondered aloud.

"Because you didn't let me finish," Monica let a cool edge creep into her voice.

"And who, Merveille?" Tigra asked, clearly not all that impressed.

"War Toy."

Now, I'll admit, I wanted to laugh. War Toy? What kind of name is War Toy? Sounds like James Cameron's most perverse fantasy. But the hush that hit the room - even Quicksilver slowed down his frantic pacing - held me in check. I waited for them to say something, but everyone was too busy spinning the wheels in their own head, so I had to open my mouth and look like some stupid rookie, "Er, who's War Toy?"

Everyone just kind of turned to me.

"She's ... well, Alkhema's a robot created by Ultron. What makes her dangerous is that her brain patterns are based on those of Mockingbird - Hawkeye's deceased wife - and she's always had it in for Clint. If she's involved, it's not just a return bout with the Masters of Evil, there's some serious psychological underpinnings that we have to be wary of."

"Ultron, who was created by Henry Pym," Tigra picked up the story, "and then, in turn, created the Vision, Jocasta and Alkhema."

"And that would be Wonder Man, Wasp and Mockingbird's brain patterns, respectively," Merveille finished off the story.

I must have had a blank look on my face. "And people say it's tough keeping track of Cable ..."

"If Ultron created her," Wonder Man interjected, "that means she's certifiably nuts."

"Not really," Quicksilver added, walking towards the group slowly.

"How do you figure that?" Tigra asked, stunned. "You're running up the walls this morning about Magneto holing up in the frozen plains of Canada and yet here we're dealing with a product of Ultron and you're acting like it's no big thing. Care to explain or should we call Doc Samson for an appointment?"

"Think for a moment, Tigra," Quicksilver responded without looking at her. His eyes were locked with Merveille's and I had the distinct impression that they weren't really interested in what any of us thought at the moment. "Ultron created the Vision and what happened? He overcame his programming and turned against Ultron, joining the Avengers. Jocasta? Overcame her programming and joined the Avengers. Why should Alkhema be any different?"

"We can't go into battle with them and think she's going to turn good all of a sudden," Merveille countered, but clearly she was mulling over Pietro's words.

"No, we can't," Pietro answered. "But the real possibility exists that it's only a matter of time before she 'finds herself', as it were, like Vision and Jocasta did. And Hawkeye could be the key to that. Let us hope that she doesn't kill him before she overrides her original programming."

LOS ANGELES COUNTY JAIL

"I hope we're enjoying our stay here, Mr. Beacher," the prison guard sneered into the cell. "Mr. Jalome Beacher, otherwise known as the super-villain Slyde. Tell me, dirt bag, why's a chemical engineer turn to a life of crime? I mean, you look like a pretty smart guy, why do you make such a bad criminal?"

Slyde said nothing.

"Well, Mr. Super-villain, sit there and say nothing, I don't care. Last time you were handing out cards those Enlightenment Foundation cards to everyone. Got any this time? I still haven't figured out why they let you in here last time without taking your costume off,* but you're not so lucky this time around. Wonder if your friends are going to come bail you out again? Probably not - no one likes a loser. You had your get out of jail free card last time and you blew it. Got nabbed by the Avengers again, huh?** Ended up right back here. We'll see how long you sit and stir this time. What'cha think about that?"

*** *West Coast Avengers 111***

**** *Last Issue***

Jalome said nothing.

He was free on bail within six hours.

**CRIMSON COWL'S HEADQUARTERS
PRESENT**

Cyclone was out for a jog.

He had to get away from the others. It's not that he wasn't a bad guy, he told himself, but he took no joy in watching Mankiller and Tiger Shark torture Hawkeye to his death. He wanted no part of it.*

*** See HAWKEYE 19**

'But zees does not make me a hero, non?' has asked himself, somewhat worried that he might be going soft. 'Ah, no, if I was a hero, I would have stayed and zaved de Archer.' Realizing his villainous heart was still in place, Cyclone felt a little better about things.

'Still, zo, won't ze othair Avengairs want revenge on us? Isn't zat stupid of us?'

Later, he would spend hours trying to explain how he didn't see a Quinjet swoop right down on top of him and Lady Merveille shoot out and zap into him.

"Oof!" he yelled, falling backwards. He realized when he saw who hit him that he'd be dead or unconscious if she had wanted him to be.

"Where's Hawkeye?" she asked, resuming her human form.

Later, she would scold herself for not seeing Flying Tiger swoop right down on top of her and knock her backwards.

"Oof!"

INSIDE CRIMSON COWL'S HEADQUARTERS

Crimson Cowl was not happy. 'Those insufferable fools! How could they have missed the Avenger's tracer signal? I specifically asked War Toy to scan him for all electronic devices! Blast her!'

OUTSIDE

TIGRA

The battle is all out and wild. Just the way I like it!

I've been waiting to pay these suckers back since the last time they messed up the Compound.* They got some nerve coming after us twice, this close together, but I guess that's why they're the Masters of Evil huh?

*** *Back in the Scooter-penned AWC 105 - 106***

"Here, kitty, kitty, come get squashed!"

Flying Tiger. Big mouth, bigger jerk. Somehow managed to take out Merveille with a lucky shot. He'll be bragging about that for the rest of his life.

"Come get it, Flying Tiger!" I yelled, noticing that his fur looks pretty ragged. "What happened to you? Forget how to clean yourself off?" Whatever caused it wasn't pleasant because his eyes about popped out of his head.*

*** *Hawkeye did it in, you guessed it, HAWKEYE 19***

"I'll kill you, Tigra!" he yelled as he dived towards me. I waited, standing tall to give him a higher target. He came in hard and fast and I waited till the last second when I leapt into the air and came down on his back. "Arrrgh!" he screamed as I raked my claws down his back, drawing lines of blood. "How you like me now?" I taunted him, smiling the entire time.

I jumped off as he spiraled momentarily out of control. Even with Merveille down - Quicksilver had scooped her up and returned her to the Quinjet - the fight was in our favor. Tiger Shark and Wonder Man were going at it hard, pounding each other relentlessly. I'll say this, Tiger Shark is a lot tougher than he looks. You look at him and you figure he's just another guy with a gimmick, but here he is really taking it to Simon.

Simon should take him out, though- ouch, that had to hurt. Simon actually looks pretty dazed.

"You will fall, Wonder Man, to the might of Tiger Shark!" Simon didn't say anything, but launched back at his

opponent. He'll finish him off now, no doubt. Probably just waiting to yell his new trademarked slogan ...

Oof. Cyclone just got dusted by Quicksilver.

Mankiller and Siryn are at a stalemate, so I start to move in that direction. Siryn's pouring her lungs out, but Mankiller is taking whatever our newest member dishes out. Mankiller is swinging wildly and has no chance to hit the flying Siryn with those blows.

Hmm, wonder if Siryn and Sam ever ... nah, not Sam.

A shadow passes overhead and I look up to see Flying Tiger aiming right for Siryn. There's no time to yell, but Siryn must've known he was there all along. She waited until he got just close enough, then turned and blasted him with her sonic scream.

Nice shot. He's all out of whack, now, and looks to crash-land somewhere soft, spinning crazily toward the ground.

"Aaargh!" Simon screamed, flinging backwards from a Tiger Shark blow. "Haha! Mighty Avenger? I think not, pal! You didn't know what you were messing with when you went toe-to-toe with Tiger Shark!" Man, what's wrong with Simon? Tiger Shark is tough, but he should be able to take this guy.

FWOOOSH!

Pietro rocketed by me like I was standing still. Which, in fact, I was, but it wouldn't have mattered if I was going all out - the guy was cooking. Tiger Shark went up a few notches in my book, though, 'cause even though Pietro nailed him time after time and even though his face and body were being knocked around so much it looked like there was one of them Alien monsters inside him trying to get out, he didn't get knocked out.

Back to Mankiller and Siryn - I was going to go help Simon up but I remembered I'm mad at him for being a prude.* She's acting like a pro - keeping Mankiller at bay while the

rest of us take care of the other members of the MoE. Figure it's time to help her out.

*** *Last Issue***

I came up on Mankiller from behind, as quietly - and seductively, I might add - as a cat. I waited till Siryn saw me and stopped screaming - no way did I want to get in the line of that kind of sonic attack.

"Lose your voice?" Mankiller taunted up at Siryn, who didn't say anything in response. Just smiled one of those "I got you right where I want you smiles".

I like her already.

I leapt at Mankiller's back, not saying anything. Heck, I didn't know what to say that wasn't just a glorified version of "I'm gonna get you!" So I just jumped on her back and wrapped my arms around her face. She tried to reach back and grab me, which was, of course, the point. She didn't catch me, but I did manage to get her all spun around trying. I sprinted a short distance away and turned around.

"Come back here!" she growled.

"No." She was about to rush after me when I pointed behind her. "Say goodnight, Gracie."

"Huh?" She turned around and found, much to her surprise and our delight, Siryn standing not five feet from her.

"SHREEEEEEEEEE!" One sonic scream later and Mankiller was done, lying on the ground, holding her ears and begging for her mommy. Well, okay, I made up the last part.

I looked around - every one of the MoE was out or down and not putting up a fight, but we weren't in the best of straights, either. We were missing our Chairman and our most powerful member was still inside the Quinjet, probably still unconscious. Simon was dazed, shaking his head and getting a hand up from Quicksilver. Man, Pietro can be about

the biggest ass I know but he's always there when you need him. Siryn and myself are both doing fine, but she looks a little winded. Guess that scream took a lot out of her.

I was feeling pretty good 'til I realized this is what they call the calm before the storm.

That's when War Toy showed up. She landed in the middle of our battle-field and walked across towards Quicksilver, bypassing me entirely. I was going to get upset and call her on it when I realized I'd rather not deal with her directly. Let Pietro handle her.

Quicksilver was busy with Simon, still, so I whistled a warning to him. He turned around and immediately went into a defensive crouch. Alkhema just walked towards him as calm as could be. Pietro didn't move. She went right up to him, and I mean right up to him and they started whispering.

"What's going on?" Siryn asked, coming over to me.

"Dunno," I shook my head. "But something's not right here at all."

We watched in a kind of awed immobility. They were passing hard words back and forth, no doubt about it, but they weren't throwing punches. No real need to go over there, even though our curiosity was pushing us in that direction. But maybe you've heard that one about what curiosity did to the cat? Yeah, if you were me you wouldn't be in a rush, either, would ya?"

"War Toy! What the hell are you doing? Deck the bastard!" Tiger Shark was up and ready to go another round. I looked around quick and Mankiller was shaking out the cobwebs. She'd be up soon. Cyclone was - crap. Cyclone was gone, but I'm sure he was around. Things were getting tense again and War Toy put herself on center stage.

"What choice will you make, hero?" she cackled at Pietro, energy seeping out of her eyes and mouth. God, that voice

gave me chills. To think that a part of Mockingbird is perverted like this ... it ain't right. "What choice? Destroy us or save your leader?"

"Huh?" I said aloud. Tiger Shark seemed to agree with me.

"Are you nuts, you stupid metal witch?" he screamed. "Let's take these guys out! I've got Wonder Bread all set up for the finishing blow!"

I looked to Simon for a response, but he didn't say a word. Just stood there with empty eyes - which was an odd look for someone who had energy where his eyeballs shoulda been - and holding his left wrist. He looked in very bad shape.

"Don't be a fool, Tiger Shark!" Alkhema turned on her teammate. "We've gotten what we want out of Hawkeye! Let us steal away while we have the chance! The final battle between the Avengers and the Masters of Evil is not destined for today." She turned back to Pietro, "The choice is yours, mutant! Crimson Cowl is now, as we speak, readying our headquarters to explode. You have five minutes to save Hawkeye, Avengers! Five minutes to negotiate the traps we have laid for you!"

Even though the look on Mankiller's face said that she didn't believe Cowl was laying traps, we really couldn't risk it.

"Avengers, let's move!" Monica blasted out of the Quinjet, rocketing toward the house in the distance. She must've been playing possum.

"This ain't over!" Tiger Shark screamed at Wonder Man, but Simon didn't even look in his direction. Poor guy. Must be hurting something fierce. I hope he - no, wait, I'm forgetting I'm still mad at him. Let him suffer.

Just, you know, not too much.

We took off in the direction of the house, Merveille and Quicksilver off like a shot and me, Siryn and Simon taking up the rear. For a second I thought War Toy might come after us, or at least thrash the Quinjet, but she ushered the MoE away. They were in pretty bad shape, all things considered, so I guess she figured it was best they just get out of there.

I try not to think about the fact that War Toy just gave up Hawkeye like that. There's more to this story than we're seeing.

INSIDE CRIMSON COWL'S HEADQUARTERS

Crimson Cowl stood at her monitor, seething with a growing anger. She had no idea why War Toy did what she did, especially after wanting to go after Hawkeye as hard as she did, but Cowl would find out.

And then the robot would pay.

EPILOGUE ONE

Hawkeye shuffled back to the Quinjet, knowing he was lucky to escape out of this mess as well off as he did. It would be a long, hard night before sleep came to him, however, and his physical well-being wouldn't have anything to do with it.

No, it would be a long night remembering his dear Bobbi and thinking over the actions of the robot with Bobbi's voice.

EPILOGUE TWO

Charlie Gantner sat in a small room, watching the dailies of today's movie shoot. She was pleased with what she saw - a feeling that had been inside her since she got Wonder Man to agree to play the Greek god Pluto in this movie of hers. She was a little disappointed that he hadn't been able to stick around for very long today, but his part was sufficiently small enough that he wasn't really needed.

She knew that shooting would be chaotic with him, which is why she made sure to get plenty of shots of him standing around in front of a blue screen just in case he was called off on some urgent mission. It'd be easy enough to just plug those images into the scenes they needed and people wouldn't know the difference. The studio had told her that if Simon was off on an Avengers mission, they'd boost her budget to do this, since the publicity they'd get would match whatever extra money they threw in.

What she saw on the small screen in front of her looked good, though. Simon wasn't a great actor, but if you could control him and play to his strengths, heck, anyone could be a star. He had presence, which is something you couldn't fake.

She just knew in her heart of hearts that people would love this performance.

There was one person, however, whose opinion Charlie would need to get or the movie would never be released. She didn't know this person, and would've called you a liar if you told her who it was, but it was a very important person in her life, whether she knew it or not.

If Simon's performance displeased him ... Charlie wouldn't ever see her second film get made.

The person she had to please was, at that moment, sitting in the room with her, though she didn't realize it. She wouldn't realize it, either, unless the man decided to let her know he was there.

And right now, Pluto was more interested in watching the dailies to see if he was being honored.

Or blasphemed.

EPILOGUE THREE

Crimson Cowl caught up with her Masters of Evil a mile away from their former headquarters. She wanted to lay

into War Toy right here, but a voice suddenly boomed out of nowhere.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"What the --?" Tiger Shark stopped. "Who talks like that anymore?"

Crimson Cowl stopped in her tracks and quickly spun around and around. She knew the voice and suddenly knew that this could turn out to be a very, very bad day indeed.

"The Masters of Evil goes here!" Tiger Shark roared at the unseen voice.

"The Masters of Evil exist nowhere that I do not say they exist!" came the voice again.

They closed ranks as a group of villains suddenly were on top of them, approaching steadily and assuredly. Cowl looked them over: Techno, the Gatherer's Vision, now called Eidolon, a nightmare version of the Beast, a new Yellowjacket and a female someone who looked like an assassin.

And last, of course, Baron Zemo.

"Let me introduce you to the real Master of Evil, Crimson Cowl!" Zemo mocked, "Techno, Eidolon, Kreature, Vespide and Suicide Selia! We are the Masters of Evil and you ... are ... IMPOSTORS!"

Crimson Cowl knew this wasn't going to be good, but she needed a fight so she could escape in the confusion, "We are the Masters of Evil, Zemo!"

Cowl was looking for a fight and those were the exact right words to say. Zemo exploded in rage, "None but Zemo shall lead the Masters of Evil! YOU SHALL FALL!!! Attack, my Masters of Evil, ATTACK!!!"

... to be concluded in CHAMPIONS 37 ...

WEST COAST LINES

Comments c/o mariner2@tiac.net

I hope you enjoyed this segment of the Masters of Evil War that Baloo cooked up. I know that Lonni and myself had a blast working with him to get this story to work out. Let me know what you think of the rotating first person narration for the various scenes. It was something I tried because I wanted to try to change the pace up a little.

Be sure to check out CHAMPIONS 37 for the conclusion of the MoE War and then check out HAWKEYE 20 and WCA 118 for the lasting effects of this crossover. Oh yeah, and WCA 118 guest stars Pietro's sister and dad, so you might want to come back for that little family get together. On with the letters and reviews ...

From Sam BLACK PANTHER Everett's Roo-commendations reviews:

WEST COAST AVENGERS #115 (Mark "Bisquit" Bousquet)--the mystery around Shape, Zola, Jolt, and more!

The Good:

--finally, something done with Shape. He's always been an annoying character to me, and while his new appearance/attitude is still annoying, it's something different.

--do I sense a new relationship for Simon? Anything to get him over the hardly-seen-in-MV1 Wanda!

--Beta Ray Bill: if he sticks around, that would be the surprise of the month! What role could he play with this team?

--is that "Heroes for Hire" comment going to go anywhere? I hope so, but at the same time, I think

Monica needs to be with the team more--that Clint/Monica dynamic is intriguing!

--no one writes a team book like Bisquit. All the characters

have a place, from Crystal's mission, to Hawkeye's, to Monica's thoughts away from the team, to Tigra's familiar role as the "...oh, and you can..." member!

The Bad:

--all that character development that Scooter started and Bisquit continued for Tigra seems to have taken a nose-dive in the past few issues...what happened?

The Score:

4 out of 5 Roos! Go Bisquit!

A few comments ...

The GOOD: I'm glad that people seem to be interested in what's going on with Shape. I racked my brain to come up with something interesting for him to do, and this is what I came up with. Shape will actually be a bigger player in the book now with less appearances than he would've if he had stayed the same character, living at the Compound. Beta Ray Bill, a character I really enjoy, just didn't fit the long term plans with the book, but he will be appearing in my opening Defenders arc in DEFENDERS 187 - 190. The HfH comment won't be going anywhere in an HfH direction, no, but Monica's debt will continue to play a role. As for Wanda ... she won't be missing from MV1 for much longer. She's about to be back in a big way.

The BAD: In a team book it seems there's always a character or two who gets back-burnered for a few issues and this was just Tigra's turn. Look for the spotlight to swing back to her more fully in a few issues. Thanks for the review, Sam. Now, everyone go out and read Sam's BLACK PANTHER and TRIATHLON!

Now, a review from Kell SQUADRON SUPREME Carpenter ...

West Coast Avengers #115:

MBQ continues to write gems on this series! It's been awhile since I've read WCA, and this is a great one to jump back onto. Mark has this great gift of being able to nail the characters' dialogue, and he does wonders with it here. Fun to read!

I enjoy the fact that there's less "action" and more character/plot development going on. I'm intrigued by what Zola's really up to, and why he's become so benevolent in his old age...

What I liked most about this ish: Mark's found something interesting to do with Shape. I have to admit, the biggest reason I gave up on the guy is that I couldn't think of one thing to do with him. Glad to see one of my errant "children" is in good hands, Mark... ;) >

Great story. Go read it if you haven't, then check out...

And to show that the Universe really does balance out, Kell is doing an excellent job with a character I couldn't come up with anything interesting to write about: Lyja. Check out SQUADRON SUPREME and see for yourself. Thanks for the kind words, Kell and rest assured that we haven't seen the last of Zola.

Excellent work Mark! Loved the surprising plot twist, especially Crystal been pregnant again. Lets hope the father is quicksilver and not a certain Black Knight!

Siryn been part of the team was predictale from the first part of the story, glad to see her on. Tigra is an excellent character, very funny. You now got me interested in Lighthouse, I'm stopping there next.

On another note, which issue happens between 114 and 115 in particular?

Oh, also read your FF, great stuff, I know really understand the World Without storyline. Next is all god's Children, which I've heard so much about. Great writing

Dominic Galliano

PS Looking forward to your Defenders

Thanks, Dominic. The father of Crystal's child is indeed Quicksilver. Of that there is no doubt. The Kree/Shi'ar War happens between issues 114 and 115. Check it out on the Epic Branch. Thanks for the comments on some of my other MV1 work, as well.

Thanks for reading and writing in, everyone. Be sure to check out the following:

CHAMPIONS 37 - The Conclusion to the MoE War as Zemo and Cowl go head-to-head! Last one standing gets to be called the Masters of Evil! Loser gets to be called Masters of Vault Block 5!

HAWKEYE 20 - Confused by Clint's recent visions and dreams? Well he is too and he's calling in some help. He's big, he's gamma powered, he's green (well part green)... he's... Doc Samson?

And then be back here for ...

WEST COAST AVENGERS 118 - Quicksilver. Scarlet Witch. Magneto. 'Nuff said.

-- Mark Bousquet ...

22.December.1999

If you'd like to join the MV1 Talk list and discuss MV1 fanfic with the over 100 people already on the list, please go to <http://www.onelist.com/subscribe.cgi/mv1talk> . You will have to register with onelist but it's a painless process that generates ZERO spam.

AWC Annual #9, by Scott Chamberlain

AWC Annual #9, by Scott Chamberlain

MV1

COMICS

Annual

#9

Apr. Yr. 4

Hawkeye! Quicksilver! Tigra! WonderMan!



To combat those threats against which no hero could stand alone, Earth's Mightiest Heroes forged a covenant to unite in battle, to protect all mankind. Now, from a second base of operations, a new chapter in their legend is being written.

Scott Chamberlain presents... *Avengers West Coast!*

"The Sign of the Bull"

Writer: Scott Chamberlain

Images: Chris Luna

Branch Editor: Jason Snyder

NOTE: This story should be read following Silver Surfer Annual #1 and before the Guardians of the Galaxy and Fantastic Four Annuals. The other parts of "Zodiac Rising" may be read at the readers' discretion.

Prologue: Three weeks ago.

Keith Bannister frowned.

Southern California's recognized foremost authority on Astrology wasn't often stumped by what he read in the star charts. But tonight, as he sat at the desk in his home in Pomona, he was.

Last night, a suddenly bright star had appeared in the heavens in the constellation Gemini. Astronomers had called it a supernova, but Keith, having spent a lifetime studying the cosmos, knew there was no star where the supposed nova had taken place.

Keith pored over the charts again. Such an event, they said, was a portent of a mighty occurrence in the cosmos. One that affected all of the signs, not just Gemini. Although the fact that the 'star' did appear in Gemini clearly meant something, Keith just couldn't figure out what. So many questions...

Keith rubbed his temples and blinked his tired eyes. He decided to try reading the charts to see what they said about his own sign, Scorpio, and was startled by what they told him. Another person figured prominently with him in the near future. Surprisingly, that person was closely tied somehow by the omen in that stars. Resurrection also figured into their combined future, and resurrection was a very prominent feature of Scorpios. Obviously, though, it couldn't mean an *actual* resurrection. Keith wondered what it could mean.

The truly odd thing though was that the other figure in Keith's future was his opposite. The opposite of Scorpio. A Taurus.

The sign of the Bull.

One week ago.

Zenith turned toward the sky once more, facing the direction the Surfer had fled in(*). Yes, she decided, she would follow him. Partly to show him the folly of defying her

wishes, and partly because she had intended to investigate Earth, his obvious destination in any case.

(*)This is taken from a scene in Silver Surfer Annual #1 -- Plagarising Scooter

She raised her arms from her side, and tendrils of power exploded from the tip of each finger and from her eyes, arrowing into the sky and vanishing into hyperspace as soon as they'd cleared the planet's atmosphere.

The tendrils followed behind the Silver Surfer, pacing him, but the former Herald of Galactus was too absorbed in his frantic flight toward Earth to notice. The tendrils soared across the cosmos, each already earmarked for a particular destination on Earth. Hours passed. Nearly a full day was gone before the tendrils entered the solar system.

Zenith's power streaked by Saturn and Jupiter in the blink of an eye, streaking toward the inner planets. As they drew near to Earth, they began to break apart from one another, each heading for their individual destinations on the North American continent. The man known as Midnight Sun was struck briefly senseless as one of the twelve tendrils struck him, finding its target. The other eleven moved on into the atmosphere, oblivious to the event.

One tendril streaked toward the lonely desert of the east part of Southern California. It impacted the Earth, seemingly being absorbed harmlessly into the ground.

Keith Bannister was driving along a lonely stretch of state highway 62, late for a meeting of his fellow astrologers, when the tendril struck, lighting the night sky. Keith slammed his breaks hard, skidding to a stop. He jumped out of his car and headed quickly into the field where he saw the light strike.

He found nothing as he reached the spot except a soft glowing of the dirt around the impact point. Soon, though, something did happen.

"By the Goddess!" Keith exclaimed as he witnessed an astounding event. Dust from the ground began to coalesce into something. A vague man-shaped outline began to form. Soon, the dust began to harden into shapes that looked like bones, quickly forming into an entire skeleton. Then, the form began to fill out. Within moments, an entire human body lay upon the sandy ground. Detailed features quickly became apparent. The man seemed a tad obese, yet Keith could tell that belied great strength. He was an older man, perhaps in his late forties, with a balding head, which was ringed by brown hair and he wore a thick mustache.

Soon, the man was fully complete. Then, he drew a sudden, deep breath and sat up, eyes wide. Dumbstruck, Keith stumbled backwards and fell on his rear.

The man turned and looked at Keith. "Yes. You are supposed to be here. She has seen to it." He rose and walked over to Keith, towering above him. An imposing figure. "I was told by Her that you are to take me to your home, so that I may recuperate from my ordeal."

"S-She? H-Her...? Ordeal...? I-I ddon't understand..." Keith stammered. The man hoisted him to his feet.

"Yes, Her. The Goddess you have worshipped all of these years. I am her herald, chosen by her. Now, take me to your home. I'm hungry. I haven't eaten in a *very long* time.

Keith let himself be led to his car, a bit dumbfounded by what he had just witnessed. He glanced at the man, noticing for the first time the glowing sigil on his arm. It was the astrological symbol of his opposite. The sign of Taurus.

The Sign of the Bull.

End Prologue.

Santa Monica, Today.

"All right, Hydro-Man, I don't know what your game is, but the Avengers are here to stop you!" Hawkeye shouted at the

villain as his team arrived on the scene.

Morrie Bench, AKA Hydro-Man looked behind him away from the throngs of people he had been preaching to at a local park. For a week now, he had been swaying new converts to his cause as he swept up the coast of California. Hydro-Man spoke of how the old traditional ways of doing things was wrong, how the establishment of the government's ways of tyranny were at an end. How unconforming, free-thinkers like himself and others would establish a New Order, and a new way of thinking, under the careful guidance of Zenith, who would soon come to free everyone's mind.

"There they are, my friends!" Hydro-Man shouted to the crowds, pointing an accusing finger at the Avengers. "Agents of the Establishment! Might makes right, so long as the status-quo is maintained! Their day will soon be at an end, thanks to Zenith!"

The crowd roared their enthusiastic approval.

"What in the Sam Hill is going on here?" Hawkeye asked.

"This can't be Hydro-Man," said Quicksilver. "Hasn't he always been rather... stupid?"

Hawkeye nodded. "Dumb as a brick. Maybe he got smart somehow?"

Morrie Bench had indeed had an epiphany of sorts. It had all began with his relocation to California. Tired of being a laughingstock, and constant punching bag of Spider-Man, Morrie had come west to San Diego to get a fresh start, but had fared no better, failing spectacularly in several simple-minded schemes to heist banks and such.

Utterly discouraged, Hydro-Man had hit rock bottom and decided to end it all. Heading out into the Pacific one night a week ago, Morrie had tried to spread his water-form out so thin that he would break apart and become one with the ocean forever.

That was when Zenith's tendril had found him, transforming the dull-witted Hydro-Man into the sharp and persuasive Aquarius, the Water Bearer.

In the intervening week, Aquarius had moved up the coast, preaching the Aquarians' Creed of non-conformity and anti-traditionalism to anyone who would listen. And listen they did. With his new Zenith-backed persuasive powers, Aquarius converted believers by the thousands. All who listened and believed immediately dropped their lives to follow him as he went.

At first, the West Coast Avengers had paid little heed to the news reports about the subject, feeling anything Hydro-Man could concoct was bound to implode eventually. But a week and several thousand converts later, the Whackos were on the scene at the park in Santa Monica, to put an end to whatever was going on.

"Well, what're we supposed to?" Lady Merveille asked. "It's not like they're doing anything illegal by meeting here."

"I'm sure there's some kind of local statute against holding a public rally without a permit," Hawkeye said. "Besides, Hydro-Man's wanted for numerous crimes, so we've got plenty of reason to break up this little weenie roast."

The archer began handing out orders. "Quicksilver, Tigra, Wonder Man, you're powers probably won't have too much effect on Hydro-Man, so you're doing crowd-control. Get these people out of here. Merveille and Siryn, you're with me. Avengers, move out.

The fight began. The crowd was none too willing to be disbursed, and turned surly, making things difficult for Wonder Man Tigra and Quicksilver.

Hawkeye directed the fight. "Okay Merveille, Siryn, use your powers in tandem. Keep Hydro-Man off balance for a few minutes."

Morrie Bench turned to face his attackers, shifting to his water-form as he did so. A glowing sigil appeared in the center of the watery, man shaped form. A sign resembling two wavy lines. "You can dispense with calling me Hydro-Man. That name no longer applies. I'm simply Aquarius, now." He rushed like a wave at Hawkeye. "And why would you need me kept off-balance? So that you can bring a secret weapon to bear while I'm distracted?"

Hawkeye dived out of the crashing Aquarius just in time, rolling into a crouch as he nocked an arrow. "Ladies, please, a few seconds here..?"

Siryn swooped in front of her chairman, emitting her sound blast at Aquarius. The sound waves resonated loudly through the water, causing Aquarius to ripple and splash violently.

"Arrrgh!" Aquarius yelled through the pain. Then, in infrared form, Lady Merveille blasted through the distracted villain, causing much of him to boil into steam.

Weakened, Aquarius briefly reverted to solid form. He looked to Lady Merveille. "Y-you control electromagnetic waves, I hear. Well, Aquarians are attuned to waves and currents themselves. For instance, brainwaves... Why don't you attack your female teammate for me...?"

Monica listened to Aquarius, she smirked. "Whatever you thought that would do, it didn't work. You're no smooth talker, Aquar- uh.. er.." Suddenly, Merveille began to find Aquarius strangely persuasive. She didn't want to hurt Siryn though. Or, did she?

No, I won't... I wo- I WILL!" More quickly than the blink of an eye, Merveille shifted from infrared to electricity, arcing at Siryn, who was about to hit Aquarius with a sonic blast from behind.

The Irish mutant let out a chilling scream as electricity shot through her body. Incapacitated, she dropped like a

stone to the ground.

"Teresa!" Hawkeye yelled. Quickly, he fired an arrow at Aquarius, who shifted to water once again, letting the blast arrow pass harmlessly through him.

"Lady Merveille, attack your teammates who are trying to disperse my disciples. I'll deal with the archer." Aquarius advanced on Hawkeye.

Clint was not without resources, however. Noting the effect of Siryn's power on Aquarius, Hawkeye let loose with a sonic arrow. The shaft screamed through the air, affecting Aquarius badly. Hawk followed that up with his version of Merveille's infrared, hitting the enemy with a heat arrow. Aquarius staggered. "Aw, you're making a big, wet mess everywhere, Hydro-Boy! Anyone got a mop?"

Lady Merveille sailed at her teammates, unable to resist Aquarius' suggestion. *I don't want to hurt my teammates, but I can't help myself!* Suddenly, an inspiration hit. Monica flew up to Wonder Man, who had his hands full with the unruly crowds. She switched to human form, and tapped Simon on the shoulder.

Wonder Man turned around to look at her. "What is it, Merv? I'm kinda busy here, ya know? Shouldn't you be helping Hawkeye?"

She hit him with a solid right-cross to the jaw.

Wonder Man staggered backwards. Though the Man of Wonders barely felt the blow through his super-dense skin, the fact of it caught him totally by surprise. "What the Hell are you doing?"

"Knock me out!" Merveille yelled. She threw another punch, which Simon blocked. "I'm under some kind of mind control by Aquarius. I have to attack you, but he didn't say how. Now, put me out before he figures out his mistake and makes me use my powers!"

"No way! Do you know how strong I am? In your human form, I could kill you!"

"Do it!" Monica screamed, kicking at him with all her might.

Wonder Man grabbed her leg, using it to flip her onto her back. He then crouched over Lady Merveille, and lightly as he could manage, slapped her across the face. Monica's head whipped back as if he'd hit her with a fist. She sighed and passed out. "Oh God, oh God...!" Wonder Man said, checking to make sure he hadn't killed her.

Hawkeye was faring badly against Aquarius with Siryn and Lady Merveille out of the fight. He was being buffeted relentlessly by Aquarius' waves. Aquarius seemed to be toying with him now. "Where's your cocky banter now, archer?"

Instantly, Quicksilver intervened. Seeing Hawkeye's predicament, he left the crowd and went to his teammate's aid. Pushing Hawk aside, the mutant speedster circled Aquarius quickly, making a cyclone that sucked the villain into it, creating a water-spout. Quicksilver soon learned his mistake, however. Unable to breathe in the water, he choked, stumbled and fell. Aquarius flung him from the cyclone with contempt. "Idiot."

Hawkeye still lay on the ground, trying to get to his hands and knees. "Gak.." He coughed water from his lungs. "W-Why, oh why didn't we b-bring C-Crystal with us?" he muttered. "Coulda used her elemental powers here..."

Aquarius advanced on the helpless Hawkeye again, but Wonder Man and Tigra intervened, attacking. "What do we do, Wonder Man?" Tigra asked. "We're the only two left standing!"

"I know." Simon replied. He took a swing at Aquarius, which passed harmlessly through his body. "Just try anything you think might work!"

Aquarius smiled to himself. These two were purely physical fighters, they had nothing which could actually hurt him. He could pick them off at his leisure.

It was nearly over. He had single-handedly defeated the entire West-coast contingent of the Avengers. Him! Morrie Bench, former second-rate villain and world-renown idiot. Zenith truly had given him unimaginable powers. He turned his attention to the remaining Avengers, preparing to obliterate them.

STOP!

The psychic command hit Aquarius like a bolt of lightning. He stopped in his track, much to the bewilderment of the two Avengers. Instantly he recognized the voice as that of Zenith. *Yes, my mistress?* He thought.

You will purposefully lose to these heroes. I have an interest in them. Allow yourself to be captured and taken to their headquarters. Later, you will be given further instructions.

Aquarius protested. "But.. I can beat them! I don't need to be captured! I can continue on to Central Cit-"

Aquarius! Zenith warned. ***It is my purpose you serve, not your own! Are you ungrateful for what I have done?***

Aquarius hung his head in shame. "No, mistress."

Sullen, Aquarius pretended to continue to fight Tigra and Wonder Man. He knew their plan, to distract him while Hawkeye used whatever device he had to deal with him. He almost hoped it wouldn't work, so he could finish them off. But he wanted to please Zenith more, so he merely traded punches with the pair.<

Hawkeye rose to his feet unsteadily. He drew a special arrow he had been holding in reserve, for this moment. With Wendy and Tigra keeping Aquarius in check, he was able to

take the time to use it. He drew a bead on the villian, aimed and fired. The arrow, as always, struck home, passing through the watery body, which then began to freeze. Quickly, Aquarius turned into a block of ice.

"Now, Wonder Man!" Hawkeye yelled. "Do it!"

Simon Willians cocked back his fist, then let loose with a haymaker, following through with his entire body. His fist shattered Aquarius, chunks of ice exploded across the park.

Just as quickly, the ice shards started to come back together, reforming Aquarius. Exhausted from the punishing attack, Aquarius involuntarily reverted to human form. Quickly, Hawkeye was one him, strapping a collar around the man's neck.

"Try and use your powers now, tough guy." Hawk said. You can thank Yellowjacket for the nullifier collar. He designed it with you in mind when we told him about how you were setting up shop out here."

Battered and bruised, the Avengers gathered themselves up, taking their prisoner with them. The remaining people still there got ugly and threw anything they could find at the heroes, yelling profanities and threats, but their hearts weren't in it anymore with their leader beaten. Eventually, the police arrived and drove off the last of them. Finally, everyone was aboard the quinjet, which departed.

One week ago.

Later, back at Bannister's home, Keith and his strange visitor had just finished eating.

Keith eyed the man. His curiosity finally outweighing his intimidation. "So... who are you, and how did you, er, appear in the middle of nowhere just like that?"

The bald man eyed him critically, popping the last of a sandwich into his mouth. "I was dead, and was resurrected, you could say, to answer your second question. As for your

first, well, I once was **Cornelius Van Lunt** , founder of the original Zodiac Cartel, and the Taurus of that group. Despite being Taurus, I didn't believe in the power that celestial objects held over me, and paid for it with the destruction of my cartel(*) and, eventually, my life, thanks to Moon Knight."(**)

(*)WCA #26

(**)And, WCA #29 --Cancerian Scooter

But now, the Goddess has given me new life and a new purpose. So we can dispense with Cornelius Van Lunt. Now and forever after, I am the personification of Taurus."

"But," Keith asked. "Why me? Of all people, why was I picked to be there for your rebirth?"

"Isn't it obvious? You, more than anyone in this area, are in tune with the cosmos. You also have connections to other people of pagan beliefs in the area. I need you to get ahold of the most powerful of them. One for each of the twelve signs. You'll represent Scorpio, of course. We need to meet them soon. Within a couple of days. Can you arrange this?"

"Of course," Keith replied. "We'll gather at our usual place. Can I ask what you plan to do there?"

Taurus smiled. "You'll see."

Today. Avengers Compound, Palos Verdes.

The Quinjet landed in the cliffside hangar at the compound. Six battle-weary Avengers plus one incarcerated acolyte of Zenith disembarked. Aquarius was led from the hangar to the main building where the holding cells were kept.

Aquarius looked around the compound as he was led in. He wondered why Zenith had bade him to allow himself to be captured. He could still easily defeat these Avengers and escape. Although Yellowjacket's collar blocked off his water power, he could still summon any of his other powers. He

could control the currents in the air, causing hurricane force winds to attack everyone. He could even mentally persuade one of them to remove his collar, giving him access to his full powers once more.

That however, was not Zenith's plan. He didn't understand, but it made no difference, so long as it pleased her, he thought.

Suddenly, perimeter alarms went off all over the compound grounds. "Someone's broken into the compound!" Hawkeye shouted. "Everyone spread out and find the intruder!"

"Don't you mean 'intruders' plural, Avenger?" A voice asked from behind Hawkeye. Suddenly, twelve other figures appeared around the Avengers, surrounding them.

Three nights ago.

Inyo National Forest is a place of spectacular beauty. Here, one can almost imagine that the Earth itself is a living creature. Perhaps that is why here is where Keith Bannister chose to hold this coven of other powerful spiritualists from around California and Nevada. Late at night, among a stand of ancient and Earth-powerful bristlecone pines, some nearly 5 thousand years old, 12 men and women have come to meet with Taurus at Keith's behest.

"So, why have you brought us all here together?" one of the twelve, a woman, asked. Taurus remembered her name, Ginger.

"I need your help." Taurus replied. "Zenith has sent me to be her herald, and you twelve are among the first of her disciples. She has chosen you for special skills you possess. Skills that will help you perform a task that I, and she, require of you."

"What sort of task?" another asked, a man named Robert.

Taurus eyed them all appraisingly. They were perfect for what he had in mind. So what if he was lying to them a little bit. It would all work out in the end. "I have been chosen as one of Zenith's heralds, but I need to greet her once she arrives in earth's orbit. For that, I need a spacecraft. There is one such craft within easy reach of here. To get it, I need the twelve of you and your unique talents."

"A spacecraft?" The skeptical Ginger asked, crossing her arms. "Where can you get one around here?"

"Avengers Compound, where else?" said Taurus. "Your job is to distract the Avengers while I take the craft and go to greet Zenith upon her arrival."

That statement created an uproar among the assembled people:

"Steal a spacecraft!"

"Fight the Avengers??"

"He's mad!"

"What was Keith thinking, bringing this man to the sacred grove?"

"Wait!" Keith Bannister said, moving to the center of the ring of people. "Hear him out. He speaks the truth."

"How do you know?" asked Ginger. "You say you saw him created in the middle of the desert, but you were the only one there. It might be a trick. How do we know this man hasn't done something to you? Brainwashed you, or something like that?"

"A good question." Taurus answered for Keith. He pulled up the sleeve of his shirt, revealing the brand of Zenith on his arm. "Does this look like a trick? It's the Mark of Taurus. I am one of the Twelve you've all seen it in your dreams, given to you by Zenith. I know you've read it in the stars. Keith isn't the only one here with that ability."

There was a long pause, broken only by the distant chirping of crickets. Finally, it was Robert who broke the silence. "But how can we fight the Avengers? We're nothing but simple believers in a religion, basically. Call us magicians, or shamans, or even witches, if you will. But our powers are not of the sort that we can battle superbeings with."

"You don't have to fight them." Taurus said. "Merely distract them long enough for me to take the ship. Your abilities, which I, with the help of Zenith will augment, will be enough to accomplish that. Once I have greeted her, and brought her the rest of the way to Earth, you need fear Avengers no longer. Their time and that of their ilk will be ended. The new age of Zenith and you, her followers will be at hand."

Taurus eyed them all. He could tell that they still had many doubts, but his mark and the fact he knew of their dreams meant that they would reluctantly go along with him. Which was all he needed. A few lies, peppered with a healthy dose of truth, had won Taurus the pawns he needed. "Now, if there are no further objections, let us go somewhere I know of where your powers can be increased to new heights."

Today.

Aquarius looked around and laughed. Twelve of them, altogether. And judging by the unique costumes they wore, Aquarius assumed they were some sort of mock-Zodiac. They weren't his real bretheren. He would have known immediately if that were the case. But he sensed that one of them, he didn't know which one, was nearby. That made him wonder what Zenith's plan here really was.

"I don't care who you are," Hawkeye growled up at the woman, who was somehow flying. "I'm just tired of fighting

astrology-types today. Avengers Assemble, and kick their butts outta here!"

The flying woman smiled. "Zodiac, attack!"

In the midst of it all, Aquarius also smiled.

Two days ago.

The door opened, letting in the dawn light and letting out old, stale air.

Taurus walked in, followed by his twelve new allies. He looked around. A heavy coat of dust covered everything, but otherwise, everything was as Cornelius Van Lunt left it many years ago.

"What is this place?" Keith Bannister asked.

"An old hideout of my former self," Taurus replied. "A laboratory of sorts. The devices we need should be here. Ah, yes. Here they are, I believe..."

The item in question was a wooden crate. Taurus pried the lid off easily, uncovering a dozen devices, which looked like large electronic bracelets, packed in styrofoam peanuts.

"These armbands my other self had created several years ago for his old Cartel." Taurus explained. "Each one harnesses a portion of the power of one of the twelve signs. They will amplify your own powers, enabling you to handle the Avengers."

One of those gathered began to protest. Taurus glared the man into silence however, and pointed a finger at him. "No more arguments. Remember, you don't have to defeat the Avengers. Your part is merely a delaying action. Once I've acquired their craft, you may retreat from their headquarters."

"I'm with you," said Keith. "And we'll all do our parts for the glory of the Goddess."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Keith." Taurus smiled. "Because I want you to come with me."

Today.

The intruders attacked, and the Avengers engaged them, however the real action was taking place elsewhere. While the Avengers were distracted, Taurus along with Keith Bannister stole quietly toward the entrance to the quinjet hangars.

"How do you know where to go?" asked Keith in a nervous tone. "And once we're there, how are you going to fly a spaceship?"

"I've been taken aboard one of these quinjets by the West Coast Avengers before." Taurus whispered back. "As for flying... our Goddess will direct my hands. I put my faith in her. As should you."

Keith quietly nodded at this reprimand. Soon, they came to the hangar's surface doors. A panel next to them demanded an access code. Acting in typical Taurean fashion, Taurus merely smashed down the doors.

Within minutes, the pair were inside the hangar.

Meanwhile.

Aquarius looked on as the 'Zodiac' fought the Avengers with a slightly amused grin. He was content to watch and see how this little drama would play itself out.

Aquarius, Zenith spoke suddenly, directly into his mind. ***The time has come for you to release yourself. The followers of Taurus have arrived. You are to take charge of them and go with them and your other followers to the designated meeting place.***

"T-Taurus?" Aquarius asked. "He is here? Why do you need me to take his people?"

I have called Taurus to myself. He is needed here. Do not question, only obey.

Aquarius needed no further incentive. Immediately, he turned to Siryn, who had been assigned to guard him.

"Release me."

"What..?" Siryn asked, a bedazzled look in her eyes. But before she had to be told again, she hastened to comply. Instantly, Aquarius assued water-form, slamming Siryn to the ground with the force of crashing surf.

continue...

Avengers West Coast 118, 119, 120



#118, by Travis Hogbin, May Year 4

Having also heard about the treaty, the Scarlet Witch returns to the WCA from her magical training in Transia to join Quicksilver in going to the newly named 'Magneto Territories' in northern Labrador. Arriving there, Magneto's son and daughter are at first full of suspicion about the whole arrangement. They meet with their father, and his new son Charles. The three discuss the past and some measure of closure is gotten by all. While still unsure about Magneto's motives, Pietro and Wanda leave for home with at least the hope that the Territories will become a true haven for mutants the world over.

#119, by Travis Hogbin, June Year 4

While Pietro and Wanda are away, the robot, Ultron, invades the Compound. Siryn is the first to be attacked, in the kitchen. Hawkeye gets pummeled next. Then Ultron searches for Crystal in her bungalow. The robot manhandles Bova, the nursemaid. Surprising Crystal, he quickly subdues the elemental and takes her captive, even while leaving Luna alone. Elsewhere in the compound, Jocasta finds herself once again under the control of Ultron. Suddenly, she receives transmissions from him and joins him as they leave the Compound. Having found none of the other Avengers he had searched for, Ultron decides to do something to attract the rest of the team's attention.

#120, by Travis Hogbin, July Year 4

The City of Los Angeles comes under attack by Ultron and Jocasta. Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch return from the Magneto Territories to find the Compound in wreckage. They find the beaten Siryn and Hawkeye. Gradually, the rest of the Whackos are assembled and the attack on LA and Crystal's capture are learned of. The team heads to downtown, scene of the destruction. By the time of their arrival, much of the city is laid waste. The 100 story Exmore Publishing Building has been completely toppled. The Avengers try to fight Ultron and Jocasta, but the smoke and dust of the wreckage obscures any good view. In the midst of the battle, Ultron also abducts Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch while the rest of the team stumbles about the gloom, trying to find one another.

AWC #121, by Scott Chamberlain

AWC #121, by Scott Chamberlain

MV1

COMICS

#121

Aug. Yr. 4

Hawkeye! Quicksilver! Tigra! WonderMan!



To combat those threats against which no hero could stand alone, Earth's Mightiest Heroes forged a covenant to unite in battle, to protect all mankind. Now, from a second base of operations, a new chapter in their legend is being written.

Scott Chamberlain presents... *Avengers West Coast!*

"The Shifting of (Metal) Plates"

Pt. 3: "A Glorious Adamantium Future"

Writer: Scott Chamberlain

Images: Chris Luna, Scott Chamberlain

Branch Editor: Jason Snyder

The Exmore Publishing Building, Los Angeles.

Dusk.

Or, at least it seemed so amid the smoke and dust of the ruined downtown area of Los Angeles.

A quartet of Avengers: Hawkeye, Tigra, Merveille and WonderMan stood at the epicenter of it all: The Exmore Building. Once a hundred-story giant, towering proudly above the LA skyline, it now lay humbled, the rubble of it's

destruction lay strewn across several blocks. A victim of Ultron's fury.

Suprisingly, the destruction was not the foremost thought on the minds of the Avengers. "Well, we'd better figure out what we're going to do," said Hawkeye.

"Go after Ultron!" Wonder Man blurted instantly. "He's got Wanda... and Pietro and Crystal too!" He added after a quick pause.

"Nice." said Tigra sarcastically, with a faint scowl at Simon.

"I cannot agree with that, Hawkeye." said Merveille. "I'm as concerned for our teammates as the rest of you... but we can't ignore the suffering going on around us. People may be trapped alive beneath the rubble. People who we are sworn to help and protect as Avengers."

Hawkeye mulled it over for a moment, with a frown. "I'm sorry," he said at last. "I can't agree with you, Merveille. Our teammates are in immediate danger as well. Their lives count for something too. Plus, we don't know yet what Ultron is up to. How many more cities will he destroy if we don't stop him now?"

"Fine." said Merveille, rather curtly. "I'm not sure I agree, but I can't find fault with your reasoning. What now, then? Siryn has our Quinjet."

Now that they had a definite course of action, Hawkeye acted decisively. "Merveille, shoot back to the Compound, see if Siryn's there with our quinjet, and bring it back. If she's not there, then bring back *another* one." Merveille started to speed off, but Hawkeye caught her by the arm. "Oh, and Monica, we'll come back here and help out as soon as we can." She nodded and left.

"What do you suppose it means if Terry's not back at the compound?" Tigra asked no one in particular.

"That Ultron must have gotten her too, I suppose." said Wonder-Man.

"That doesn't make sense." Tigra frowned. "Everyone else he's taken has been, in Ultron's twisted way of seeing it, related to him somehow. Terry's got no connection to Ultron whatsoever. What do you think, Hawk?"

Hawkeye shrugged. "Doesn't matter. We can't afford to worry about what happened to Siryn. We've got bigger fish to fry.

Avengers Compound

"We'll be there, me love...don't ye worry. I'm out." And with that, the re-enforcements were on their way.

Siryn and Living Lightning sat at the monitor screen, having just shut it off, when roaring in from behind, came a metallic monstrosity.

"I think not, Avengers!" cried Ultron, sweeping the two aside effortlessly as he crushed the monitor assembly with a powered adamantium fist.

"I require your antiquated, yet sufficient facilities for my experimentation. Therefore interference on the part of yet more of your so-called 'heroes' is forbidden." He strode toward Siryn, arms outstretched toward her.

Siryn didn't feel inclined to point out that she had already gotten through to the X-men. Let Ultron be surprised. In the meantime, she was in mortal danger. The Irish mutant let loose with a full blast of sonic energy. Ultron seemed momentarily staggered, but little else. Still, it gave her the time she needed to get away from the robot.

"Ineffective, Avenger." Ultron said in a detached manner, as if having all the time in the world to analyze his opponents attacks. "While the attack momentarily flooded my auditory sensors, its result was temporary. Already all functions are operating normally again."

"Well, *loco* ," the Living Lightning said, switching to electrical form. "Let's see how you stand up to a bit of electricity!" He fired a bolt of lightning from his fingertips, aiming for the robot's eyes.

Ultron was unfazed. "Equally pathetic, Avenger," it continued in its clinical voice. "If not more so. Not only has your feeble attempt to blind me failed, your electrical powers are readily absorbed by my energy inductors."

The Lightning blanched. "Uh... Siryn? Maybe now's the time to retreat. We're a bit outmatched here. We need help."

"Don't worry, Lightning," said a voice. "Help has arrived." The person belonging to the voice streaked into the room.

"Lady Merveille!"

Merveille immediately assaulted Ultron with a wide variety of attacks ranging across the electromagnetic spectrum. The metallic monstrosity was actually driven back, though it was difficult to tell if the attacks did him any real harm.

"Now's the time to retreat!" Merveille yelled at the others. "Let's get back to the quinjet. We need more help."

Merveille gave the Avengers the breathing room they needed to escape. The three beat a retreat from the monitor room. From there, they made a beeline to the quinjet. They had escaped, but Ultron was in control of the Compound.

Standard Savings Bank, West Hollywood Branch

"Heh! Lookit 'im sweat, boys!"

Jack Zimineck was tied to the door of the bank vault, a bomb strapped across his chest. It just wasn't his day. Jack, manager of this local branch, had tried to sneak to one of the silent alarm buzzers when quartet of ski-mask wearing bank robbers had stormed into the place, waving assault rifles around and screaming at everyone with Australian accents to get on the floor.

Jack had been caught, but not before he'd managed to trip the alarm. Being strapped to the vault was his punishment.

"Yeh," said one of the robbers, "He's learnt 'is lesson, I'll warrant."

"Learn't a bit too late." said their leader.

"You mean yer gonna let 'im hang their 'til it blows, mate?" asked another robber.

"G'wan!" said the leader. "Empty out the teller drawers if you haven't the taste for a bit 'o death! I'll keep an eye on this bloke 'til she's ready t'blow!"

Jack begged with the robbers to let him go, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. He prayed silently. Jack had embezzled quite a bit of cash over the years, and now in his moment of need he quietly asked God for forgiveness and promised to return the stolen cash if only he could live. After that, Jack, having found that a host of angels had indeed not flocked to his rescue, began to wonder where the police were. They should have been here by now, he thought. What about heroes? Hadn't the Avengers set up shop out here again? Where were they all?

Truth be told, the robbers had been extremely lucky in choosing their time for the robbery. In the wake of Ultron's rampage through downtown, Every available law-enforcement officer in much of the greater Southern California area was being called in to help with the aftermath. Other crimes, even bank robberies, were given a temporarily lesser priority. The police were coming, but naturally response time was down. The Avengers? They had much bigger problems.

Jack was still hoping for help to arrive, when the lead robber yelled out. "Git down, mates! She's blowin'!"

The last thing Jack did at that moment, oddly enough, was look down at his pants in annoyance. "Aw, damnit..."

Avengers Compound. Biochem lab, sub-basement one.

Slowly, agonizingly... finally Quicksilver awoke.

Immediately, he wished he hadn't.

The first thing he saw upon awaking was the leering metallic grimace of Ultron, leaning over him and staring directly into his face. He closed his eyes again.

"Are you awake, mutant?" asked Ultron. "That is good. You should meet your fate fully cognizant of what is about to happen to you."

Quicksilver opened his eyes again. He looked about, trying to take stock of the situation. Immediately he realized he was strapped down, spread eagle, on a metallic table, which was slanted slightly so that his head was raised above the level of his feet.

It seemed he was in the Compound's biochem lab, but there had never been such restraining devices in there before. He looked around. On one wall were a line of sockets in which an assortment of old Ultron bodies, in various states of disrepair, were housed. That also was new. Near them stood Jocasta, still and quiet as a statue. Staring unblinkingly straight ahead.

As his eyes became better focused, Quicksilver noticed that alterations were being made at an alarming rate to the room by tiny metallic insect-like things.

"Do you like the changes my 'bytes' have made to your laboratory?" asked Ultron. "As miniature robotic extensions of my being, they can be commanded to restructure this room as I see fit. Your lab was antiquated by my standards before, but now it is a state-of-the-art facility worthy of Ultron!"

Quicksilver ignored the robot's boasts. His attention had become fixed on two other restraining devices, like his own. Strapped down to them were the Scarlet Witch and Crystal,

his sister and wife, both unconscious. Crystal looked deathly pale. "Wanda... CRYSTAL!" Quicksilver shouted in a hoarse croak.

"Your concern for your family is commendable, but hardly necessary." Ultron commented. "They are both alive. I admit that the inhuman was unnecessarily harmed, but she has been stabilized. I could not see any of you die. After all, the three of you are my family as well."

Quicksilver seethed. "We are no family of yours, you unholy mechanical monstrosity! Let me loose from here so that I might-"

Ultron held up a hand, cutting him off. "Save your bravado for your own flesh-based kind, on whom it may have some effect. I care not." The robot strode about the room, hands clasped behind his back as he continued to brag. "Of course you are my family. The Scarlet Witch is the one-time wife of the Vision, creation of Ultron! You are the Witch's brother, therefore we are all related. Extended family perhaps, but family nonetheless."

"Bore me with your meaningless prattle all you wish, robot," Quicksilver bit off, "but if you do not release my wife and sister, I will hunt you down and destroy you if it takes the rest of my life!"

"Not a very gracious attitude," Ultron scolded, "considering I have saved your wife's life- and that of your unborn child- at least for the present. You should be grateful, mutant. I intend to bestow a great gift upon my family!"

"Any gift you would bestow, Ultron, We don't want or need."

"Obstinate to the last, eh? Nevertheless, this gift you shall have." The robot swept an arm grandly toward the wall of old Ultron bodies. "Imagine if you will, the ultimate hybrid of machine and flesh! The bodies of three Avengers, pinnacles

of humanity - such as it is - melded with the spare parts of these former Ultrons!" Quicksilver's eyes went wide.

"Yes," said Ultron, nodding at him, "at last you begin to grasp my plan! The parts of these Ultrons shall be grafted onto you, replacing various flesh and blood parts. Once complete, with your new Ultron parts, which are as much an extension of me as are my 'bytes', we shall be one consciousness! Also, at last we will truly be that which I say we are: a family!"

Ultron moved once again to Quicksilver's side. At some unseen command, Jocasta also came near, bringing with her a tray of exotic tools.

"I only wish," said the robot, "that my entire family, Pym and his wife and the Vision, were here to take part in this glorious day. No matter, they will also be dealt with soon enough. In the meantime, I will work with those that I have!"

Ultron took one of the tools from Jocasta's tray, and set to work on Quicksilver.

Pietro's horrified scream was long and loud...

Later, above the Compound.

The quinjet circled above the grounds as Hawkeye surveyed the scene below. "It seems awfully quiet down there," said the bowman. "You guys sure he's still down there?"

"He seemed awfully eager to get ahold of the Compound, Hawk," said Living Lightning. "Why would he just leave after driving us off?"

"Good point, Miguel. It doesn't help any of this make sense though."

"Aye," said Siryn. "and we dinna want to leave the place to that thing, but we had little choice."

Hawkeye gave Siryn a consoling smile. "That's fine, Terry. You guys did good." He looked to Tigra in the cockpit. "Take

her down, Tigra. Land her right in the exercise yard. We'll go from there.

Tigra set the quinjet down in VTOL mode, while Hawkeye laid out his plan of attack. "Now, if we meet any resistance down there, Tigra and Lightning are to veer off from the fight. You two are our rescue team. Try to find Crystal, Piet and Witchy and bring them back to the fight, if they can manage it. Meanwhile, Simon, Siryn, Merveille and I will take the fight to Ultron. Any questions?"

There were none.

"Good, move out."

Several minutes later.

The team had crossed the exercise yard and come up the steps to the back patio and pool area. The planned search pattern was to enter the Compound through the back door to the kitchen and search the first and second stories before taking the elevator down into the sub-basements.

Well, that was the plan, anyway...

An adamantium forearm - just a forearm - came rocketing out of the air suddenly and hit Wonder Man square in the jaw, knocking him sideways into the pool.

"Okay!" yelled Hawkeye immediately. "Spread out! Be ready for anything! Tigra, Lightning, you know what to do!"

The Living Lightning and Tigra took off immediately for the innards of the Compound, while the rest of the team fought against a sudden onslaught of adamantium body parts. Some were nearly whole Ultrons, while others, like the fist that struck Wonder Man, were merely limbs.

Siryn was assaulted by a nearly complete body, missing only the right half of its head and its left foot. Her sonic powers seemed to have little effect upon the automaton and she was forced to fly off in retreat.

Wonder Man, having extricated himself from the pool, came dripping up behind the body and grappled it around the torso. "I once destroyed an entirely complete adamantium robot!"* he said. "I think I can handle this pile of junk from the scrap heap!"

* Remember #106, anyone? --Reminiscent Scooter

Wonder Man reached in through the headless neck of the body and began ripping out wires, circuit boards and other inner components. In short order, the Ultron body began to shake and jerk spasmodically. Sparks flew out the neck, then smoke wafted up. The body collapsed to the ground and lay still.

"Attaboy, Wondy!" cheered Hawkeye, pumping a fist into the air. The archer then went back to trying to knock flying limbs out of the air with his arrows.

Perhaps the body parts were merely extensions of Ultron, but either way, they had not the fighting spirit of the original. Still, they were made of adamantium, and that made them hard to destroy. The Avengers were holding their own against them, but that was all.

Sub-basement One.

The elevator doors opened.

Tigra and Living Lightning peered out nervously. The sub-basement was dark. Pitch black beyond the glow of the elevator's own florescent bulb. It was an extreme rarity for the lights to be out in the sub-basements. If the power failed, the Compound had it's own generator. It even had a back up generator in case the primary failed. Nevertheless, it was dark now.

"I don't know, Miguel" whispered Tigra, "this is creeping me out. All my fur is standing on end."

Miguel did notice that she looked a bit fluffed out and also the agitated way which she twitched her tail. "Don't worry,

Tigra." he whispered with a slight smirk. "Hawkeye didn't send the Living 'Lightbulb' with you for nothing!" He shifted to lightning form, crackling with electrical energy and illuminating the hallway which led from the elevator.

"Beautiful..." quipped Tigra. "We've got light, but I can't think of a better way of saying 'Here we are!'. Besides, I can see in the dark. I've got cat's eyes."

"Well, I don't," Lightning retorted. "So we need light anyway. Let's go."

They proceeded quietly down to where the hall bisected another. Most of this level was devoted to what amounted to the Avengers own private hospital. To the left was the biochem lab, surgical prep room, and operating room. To the right was intensive care, a patient's room and a secondary kitchen. Straight ahead was a medical storage room and the monitor room. After some debate, it was decided that Tigra and Lightning would stay together and search the level room by room, starting with intensive care.

Finally, they worked their way around to the left hallway. They stood at the door to the biochem lab, under which a thin beam of light could now be seen. "Douse that light!" Tigra whispered harshly at the Lightning, her tail now swishing back and forth like a whip. Miguel complied.

Slowly, Tigra pushed open the door. The sight that greeted the two Avengers was a harsh shock. What had once been their biochem lab had been transformed into some kind of futuristic cybernetics lab.

Their attention was quickly diverted however, by the sight of Crystal and Scarlet Witch, strapped spread-eagle to a pair of strange, tilted metallic tables. The Scarlet Witch was awake and alert, immediately she saw her two teammates enter. A wave of relief washed over her.

"Come here!" she said in a hoarse whisper. "Unstrap me." Tigra and Miguel hastened to comply. "Crystal too. I think

she needs medical attention still. She's been moaning to herself over there.

Suprisingly, Crystal was conscious when they unstrapped her, but dazed and confused. "I'll be alright," she said as Tigra and Lightning helped her to her feet. They, however, did not let go as she wobbled on her legs.

"Now we've got to get Crystal out of here." said the Witch.

"No...!" Crystal said weakly. "He's got Pietro back there in the operating room. We've got to help him..."

"I know, Crys, I know," said Scarlet Witch. She set her jaw. "Right now, though, you're in no shape to help anyone. As for Piet, I'm afraid we'd better come back with reinforcements. We can't help him yet.

"Indeed you cannot, female!" said a cold, metallic voice from behind the door to the operating room. The door opened and silhouetted within was the shape of Ultron. The robot strode into the room. "The speedster is now far beyond any of your help, even should he wish it, which I assure you, he does not!"

Tigra looked to the other door leading to the hallway, hoping to escape with Crystal. However, in that door, like a statue stood Jocasta, blocking the way. How she had snuck up behind them, Tigra had no idea. Yet the fact remained: they were trapped.

Meanwhile, Ultron continued with his insane tirade. "Now, Avengers, look upon the glorious future that awaits all of my family!" He gestured toward the operating room door. There, once again stood another silhouette. As this figure entered, a collective gasp went up from the Avengers. Standing before them was what used to be one of their own.

It was Quicksilver, yet it wasn't. His lower right leg, below his knee, was replaced by one of Ultron's, as was his entire left arm. An adamantium shell covered much of his chest.

However, that was not the worst.

Because of the worst part, Tigra and Living Lightning could not have recognized him without his costume.

Because of it, Wanda lost her cool and shrieked in terror for her brother.

Because of it, Crystal cried out for hopelessly for her lost husband before collapsing to the ground in unconsciousness once again, reflexively cradling her belly and the unborn child that grew there still.

Because of what...?

Because of the perfect duplicate of Ultron's head which now sat on Quicksilver's shoulders.

Next: *More* stuff like this!

Send mail to toscooter@paratime.ca

Welcome!

Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoyed it. I know I did.

Still, this isn't how I wanted to come back onboard AWC. In a perfect world, Travis would have wrapped up this storyline before handing over the reins to me. So much for that. For whatever reason, Travis never did finish up, so after waiting well past the original deadline, both Avengers BE Jason Snyder and I agreed it was time to move forward. I honestly hope Travis understands and bears us no ill will.

I hope that this issue didn't read like a fill in issue, I tried my best not to have it seem that way. However, I have no idea what Travis had planned for this storyine. I'm just going forward with my own ideas on how to finish it up, which it will with the next issue. Even so, I'm personally pleased with how it turned out. My wife called it 'chilling' and I brimmed with pride. :)

After next issue, we'll be getting into my own vision for this book. That's when I hope things will really take off! Until then, a teaser of characters you can expect to see during my run:

Exodus and the Acolytes

Baron Zemo and the Masters of Evil

Leir, Celtic God of Lightning

Proctor and the Gatherers

Arcturus, a mysterious new creation of my own

The Cat People, from the 'Land Within'

Alkhema AKA War Toy

...and the rest we'll leave secret for now. :)

Here's hoping you enjoy the ride!

Scott 'Scooter' Chamberlain

2/7/2002

AWC #122, by Scott Chamberlain

AWC #122, by Scott Chamberlain

MV1

COMICS

#122

Aug. Yr. 4

Hawkeye! Siryn! Tigra! Crystal!



To combat those threats against which no hero could stand alone, Earth's Mightiest Heroes forged a covenant to unite in battle, to protect all mankind. Now, from a second base of operations, a new chapter in their legend is being written.

Scott Chamberlain presents... *Avengers West Coast!*

"The Shifting of (Metal) Plates"

Pt. 4: "Ultron Who???"

Writer: Scott Chamberlain

Images: Chris Luna, Scott Chamberlain

Branch Editor: Jason Snyder

Avengers Compound. The back patio.

Whizzt!

Hawkeye's arrow streaked across the patio, its head passed cleanly through a gap in the seam between two plates in the body of a damaged Ultron. A blast like a thunderclap boomed within the adamantium body. Smoke roiled out from the headless neck and other seams in the metal body. The robot toppled to the ground.

"Now!" Hawkeye yelled. "Pour it on! Avengers Assemble!"

Lady Merveille did indeed pour it on. She shifted to laser energy and blasted through the open shoulder seam of an Ultron. The drone spasmed a few times then crashed to the floor.

Siryn, despite Hawkeye's rallying cry, was being menaced by an Ultron body. She blasted away with her sonic powers at it to no avail. Backpeddling, she tripped over a patio chair and laid sprawled on her back. The robot advanced, arms outstretched.

"Did I hear someone say 'Assemble?' " A voice asked from above. A figure flew in and landed upon the roof of south wing of the main house. His longish blond hair was the only feature of his head visible, sticking out of a mask which otherwise covered his face. He wore spandex of an indeterminate color, which seemed to shift if he moved. "Looks like you guys could use some help!"

"Variable!" Hawkeye shouted in relief and a bit of annoyance. "Quit posturing up there and lend us a hand!"

The Variable blushed underneath his mask. "Oh... er, right!" He seemed to concentrate for a moment, trying to tap into his ability to shift from one power to another power at random. Suddenly, the new power took effect. At an alarming rate, the Variable began to... gain weight! In seconds, his body grew to grotesque proportions and he looked like a stuffed and stunned Thanksgiving turkey. The sudden added weight threw the Variable's balance off. With a cry of "Holy craaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaap....!!!", he fell over and rolled off of the roof to the patio below.

The Ultron attacking Siryn looked up too late. As Siryn streaked off into the air in escape, nearly half a ton of human flesh landed atop the robot like a falling meteorite. The Variable's impact swallowed the drone whole in his body, holding it firmly beneath his mass at the bottom of

the small crater the crash had created in the patio's concrete floor.

"Well, whatever works, I guess..." the Variable muttered, completely mortified.

Sub-basement One. Biochem lab.

A shocked Scarlet Witch feebly reached out a hand toward what was once her brother. "Pietro!" She said in a gasp. "Are you there? Can you hear me?" The Ultron-headed Quicksilver gazed silently with that squint-eyed Ultron stare at his sister. Ultron answered for him. "I assure you mutant, he can hear you as well as I can, though it matters not. He will not speak to you until you are also joined with us!"

Ultron and Quicksilver advanced suddenly on the Avengers; Wanda, Tigra, Living Lightning and the prone Crystal; as did Jocasta, moving from her position behind at the lab's door.

Wanda seeing this, horrified as she was, knew action had to be taken and managed to collect her wits. She was still outraged and shocked in the back of her mind at what she had just witnessed, but long years of honed instinct took over. She went into auto-pilot. "Tigra, Lightning! We've got to protect Crystal! Surround her!"

They squared off, three on three. Tigra faced Jocasta, Lightning against Quicksilver. The Scarlet Witch moved to intercept Ultron, knowing that with her hex power and magical abilities, she was probably the only person at the Compound with any prayer of stopping the robotic monster.

Battle ensued.

The patio.

Hawkeye surveyed the wreckage on the patio. For the most part, the attacking Ultron automatons had been subdued. Here and there a lone leg or arm still sailed about, but these were being quickly taken care of by his

teammates. A disembodied Ultron head was actually trying to bite Wonder Man, but with Simon's ionically charged body, he seemed to barely even notice it and flicked the head away with a mere wave of his arm.

Hawkeye walked over to the bloated mass that was the Variable. "Hi Var!" he said with a smirk. "Nice of you to show up when you did. Have you been putting on weight?"

The Variable lay in the crater like a dead blowfish. He scowled at Hawk's comment. "Very funny. I got the general alert to assemble.* At least I managed to take one of them with me."

* Siryn sent in in issue #120 -Scooterrific

"Can you keep ahold of that thing?" Hawkeye inquired.

The Variable considered it for a moment. "I think so. At least until this particular, er... power... wears out."

"Hope it's long enough," Hawkeye said. "The real Ultron's around here still. We'll need all of us to fight him. Siryn walked up then. "Aye. That's why I also called in some help. She looked up into the sky. "Funny, but I expected them here by now."

Hawkeye looked at her, wondering what sort of help she'd called. He knew she used to be with X-Force, a group with a rather shady reputation, to say the least. He shrugged mentally. His own past wasn't exactly ivory white. "Well, that's good. Though I don't want so many of us around that we're tripping over ourselves to get at the bad guys."

"Well, lets get ourselves together. We've still got Ultron to deal with. Better find out where Greer and Miguel are too."

Ruuummmble!!!

The shock came from right beneath their feet, nearly knocking them all over, except for Variable, who was planted like a tree where he was.

"Uh, I think I know where to find Ultron!" said Wonder Man.

Standard Savings Bank. West Hollywood Branch.

Finally, the police had arrived, albeit too late to apprehend the gang of bank robbers that had made off with a sizeable haul of cash.* Mostly, the police and paramedic teams were involved in a cleanup operation. At least those few that were there, that is. Due to Ultron's rampage, only the smallest of emergency crews could be spared for any other duty than to help with the rescue effort in downtown LA.

* See last issue - Scooter.

Suprisingly enough, the paramedics had work to do. The robbers had treated the bank manager rather harshly. Strapped to the vault door with a bomb on his chest, Jack Zimineck had been trapped when the bomb exploded. Despite the odds, the EMTs had found him badly injured but, quite alive.

His chest, which by all rights should have been disintegrated by the blast was intact. He was direly wounded; one lung collapsed, severe bomb-shrapnel wounds pock-marked his chest and torso; but he was alive.

Alive and even, semi-coherently, conscious. In a vague sort of way, Jack Zimineck was aware of what was happening, and where he was.

And he swore revenge. On the robbers and everyone who had failed to stop them.

Avengers Compound.

Ruummmble!!

The ground shook again beneath the Avenger's feet. Suddenly, like a volcano a portion of the patio and mansion erupted from underground. Bodies of three Avengers; Scarlet Witch, Tigra and Crystal; flew outward from the hole and fell to the ground and laid still. The Living Lightning

soared into the sky in electrical form before circling back around to attack again.

"Mother of God!" Lady Merveille exclaimed upon seeing the wreckage and her teammates.

"Look!" Wonder Man exclaimed, pointing at the newest crater in the Compound. "Something else is coming up!"

Something else indeed. From the hole rose Ultron and with him his two companions, the controlled Jocasta and the newly created cyborg, Quicksilver.

"Och! Is that... that, Quicksilver?" Siryn asked, pointing from above as she flew overhead.

Ultron regarded the Avengers. "Indeed it is. Or, at least it was. He has now achieved his ultimate destiny! The perfect blend of machine and man!"

"Bull!" cried Hawkeye in denial. "Can't be! If that's Quickie, then I'm a mutant!" He nocked an arrow and fired it at the cyborg. However, still possessing his genetic ability for speed, Quicksilver easily dodged the shaft, and began streaking toward his former teammate.

In an instant, the cyborg was upon Hawkeye and pummelled him repeatedly with his newly mettalic left arm. The archer fell, stunned and bloodied.

"Holy!" Wonder Man cried. Uncharacteristically, he snapped off orders. "Get them, get them!" Angrily, he streaked directly at Ultron. "I'll shred you like I did your mate, Wartoy!"

Ultron seemed perplexed by the remark, as it absorbed a blow from Wonder Man and stumbled backward. "My... mate?" Suddenly, Ultron actually laughed. Such a disquieting sound made everyone involved pause momentarily. "My mate! I see that Alkhema has not yet spoken of me. Not even to the archer!" He laughed again. "You do not know who I am! But you will and soon!"

Wonder Man blinked in confusion. "Shut up! Don't play games! You're Ultron, and you're going down!" The Ionic Avenger clasped his hands together and struck the adamantium with a truly titanic double fisted blow to the face... to little or no effect. Ultron stared at him with his permanent mettalic grin, still laughing hollowly at them.

Meanwhile, in Zurich, Switzerland

Doctor Stephane Floriansen worked in his lab, unravelling scientific Gordian knots, burning the midnight oil at a late hour.

A noted Swiss biologist and geneticist, Dr. Floriansen had recently become front page news material with his anouncement of a chemical process by which the natural powers of mutants everywhere could be 'cured' and, perhaps more importantly, transferred into other beings.

The fact that his findings were only very preliminary did nothing to quell the storm of articles that circulated worldwide via press, television, and internet.

Unfortunately for the good doctor, this particular story had attracted the attention a most unsavory sort. Suddenly, the door and windows of his lab were blown in by some sort of energy. Several figures leapt into the room, and quickly apprehended the panicked doctor and held him still.

Then, another figure floated through the door. Dr. Floriansen looked at this floating figure: Long flowing black hair, a face with skin nearly crimson. Two appendages something like wings jut from his back, attached to the long white cape he wore. The figure smiled evilly and addressed the captive.

"Greetings. Dr. Floriansen, I presume? You would perhaps know me as **EXODUS!** These," the mutant gestured to the other figures who held down the doctor. "are my Acolytes."

Exodus allowed himself to float gently to the floor. He clasped his hands behind his back and regarded Dr.

Floriansen with a smirk. "You have recently made an intriguing discovery. A process by which the powers of mutants, such as ourselves, can be erased and transferred to others." Suddenly, his hand snaked out and grabbed the doctor by the throat, shouting directly into his face. "A cure, you call it! How arrogant of you! As if we of the race Homo Superior have need of your cure!"

Slowly, Exodus released the scientist's neck. He calmed himself. "Nevertheless, your process has certain uses... for me. You, doctor, will help me to understand this process, or you will die." he nodded. "And once you have shown me the way, I will at last be able to become in fact, what I have heretofore claimed in name only! The one, true Heir of Magneto!"

Back at the Compound.

The Variable lay on the ground, watching helplessly as the Avengers fought Ultron and his cohorts for their lives. With his current weight power, he could do no more than lay there and hold down the Ultron body he had fallen on top of.

Much as he wanted to, the Variable knew his best course of action was to stay where he was. If he tried to shift to a new power, he'd let the Ultron body benteath him free. Also, there was no guarantee his next ability would be of any use to the Avengers, such was the nature of his random power shifts.

Unfortunately, the decision seemed to be made without him anyway. He noticed suddenly that his overbloated body was quickly returning to normal. In seconds he was reduced to his regular body weight, but he still lay uopn the Ulttron. The robot seized the opportunity, and flung Variable aside like a discarded rag, moving back into the battle.

Siryn found herself with the Living Lightning, teaming up against Jocasta. The female robot was at a disadvantage, being grounded against two flying opponents. She lanced

out with energy beams from her eyes, but Siryn nimbly avoided them while Lightning was little affected by such energy in his electrical state. Jocasta for her part, however, seemed mostly immune to the pair of Avenger's powers.

"Remember," said Lightning to Siryn. "She under Ultron's control. She can't help what she's doing!"

"Er... Aye..." said Siryn. She narrowed her eyes at the robot. Controlled or not, Jocasta was dangerous. Normal use of her sonic powers having little effect, Siryn tried a different tack. She focused her energy into a tight beam of intense sound. The beam struck Jocasta with actual physical force, throwing the robot back through a compound wall.

Lady Merveille drew Quicksilver. With his mutant speed still functioning, Monica knew she was the only one outside of Living Lightning who could hope to match his swiftness. Merveille was actually quite a bit faster in any of her energy forms, being able to move at or near light speed. Quicksilver, however had it all over her in the maneuverability department. He could, quite literally, stop and turn on a dime. Even at top speed. So while Merveille lashed out at him differing types of energy attacks, the cyborg Quicksilver dodged them effortlessly, even while returning fire with his adamantium arm. An equally useless gesture while Monica stayed in energy forms.

Merveille took the opportunity to survey the rest of the battle. Wonder Man and Ultron continued to trade staggering blows. Wonder Man possessed near incalculable strength, yet even his power could not so much as dent the robot's adamantium hide. Ultron, for his part, was nigh indestrucable, but he lacked the sheer offensive might to do Wonder Man any serious harm. Their fight was the classic example of the irresistible force against the immovable object; a stalemate.

In fact, the entire battle was a stalemate, in Merveille's estimation. The two sides could go on like this for hours. Until the Avengers tired, that was. Ultron didn't have that problem, as a machine. He and his allies could keep this up indefinitely. The Avengers would eventually weaken through fatigue. Ultron could win this fight through sheer attrition, if nothing else. Monica's analysis brought her to the realization that if the Avengers were to win, they'd have to strike decisively now. And to do that, Monica would have to think outside the box a bit.

Meanwhile, not far away at all...

From high above among the clouds, she had watched the battle with bemused interest. The sheer wreckage that 'Ulty' had sown across Los Angeles delighted her on a very personal level. She wished in a way that she could have taken part in such visceral destruction, but that wouldn't do just now. Still, something akin to pride swelled in her in admiration of 'Ulty's' accomplishment.

At any rate the battle below now seemed to be going badly for the Avengers. She supposed she was going to have to put a stop to it, unfortunately. She didn't care about the Avengers as a whole, really, but if she let 'Ulty' kill Hawkeye, it would quite ruin her plans. Besides, she thought she loved the archer. The idea of that annoyed her a bit, but there it was anyway.

With a sigh, and a slight tinge of regret she began to fly down toward the Compound.

The Compound.

Foggily, Hawkeye stirred. He looked around for a moment to get his bearings. Then he remembered the pummeling from that thing that looked like Quicksilver. He took stock of the battle raging around him, while getting to his feet. Wonder Man, Merveille, Lightning, Siryn and the Variable

were still on their feet, fighting Ultron and his minions. Scarlet Witch, Tigra and Crystal were down.

The archer decided he had to do something now to help bring the battle to an end. He brought out an arrow he'd been holding in reserve. Not because he thought he'd need it in a desperate situation, but because he wasn't sure if it would work. He shrugged. There was no guarantee any of his arsenal, short of a vibranium arrow (which he didn't have), would have any effect on Ultron or his bunch.

Hawkeye fired the arrow. Not at Ultron, but rather in a spot generally located between all of the bad guys. The head exploded, releasing a mild electromagnetic pulse.

The effect was immediate, at least on the remaining Ultron body. The automaton immediately seized up and fell to the ground. The EMP was somewhat less successful otherwise. The Quicksilver cyborg stumbled and fell to its hands and knees. The remaining flesh and blood parts began to jerk and shake spasmodically. Jocasta seemed on the verge of collapsing like the Ultron shell, but then righted herself and continued her attacks.

As for Ultron himself, the robot seemed momentarily dazed, but then shook his head and backhanded Wonder Man, continuing his personal battle with the Ionic Avenger.

The Variable got up and dusted himself off after being thrown. He needed a new power if he was going to get back into the fight. He closed his eyes. Probably not a wise thing to do in the middle of a battle he told himself. Then he told himself to shut up and concentrate. In a moment, he felt something. Opening his eyes he saw that his hands were now glowing a bright, luminescent blue. Smiling, he held them out toward Ultron, palms forward, aiming to fire the energy beams he was sure would blaze out at the robot.

Nothing happened.

Variable looked at his hands with a slight frown. Experimentally, he touched a piece of broken concrete from the compound wall, thinking he might actually have to make contact with an object. Again, nothing. His hands merely glowed blue.

He sighed, rolling his eyes toward Heaven. Somebody up there just didn't like him today.

In the meanwhile, Lady Merveille made her move. Figuring that Ultron's control of Jocasta might be based upon some form of signal, she switched to radio wave form and flew around Jocasta, creating a barrier of interference between her and any signal Ultron might be using. "Jocasta, can you hear me?" she asked.

Jocasta's response was immediate. "Yes!" She broke out of the lethargic, trancelike state she had been in since the biochem lab. "Thank you, Lady Merveille! I am in your debt." She moved toward Ultron aggressively. "Now, I have a score to settle."

"Wait," Merveille said, with some concern. "If you move out from my interference, you might fall under Ultron's control again."

"No," said Jocasta with certainty. "He took me by surprise before, but I've already written countermeasure programs into my memory. He'll never take me that way again." She moved out of Merveille's protection with conviction.

Now, all of the Avengers still standing converged on Ultron. The robot looked at them with his permanent grin. "Come then! I will simply destroy you all myself, then continue on with my plans as normal." For the Avengers part, there was no thought of asking for a surrender. They knew Ultron didn't want it and they didn't want to ask. Some of them, especially the veteran members like Hawkeye and Wonder Man, were bone weary of dealing with Ultron time after time after time. Ultron was created long ago by Hank

Pym, an Avenger, and had menaced them ever since. They thought now it was high time that the Avengers ended the Ultron menace once and for all.

As a team, they moved forward. Suddenly, another player entered. She landed in the space between enemies and eyed them all. "Well, is this a private party?" she asked in her metallic voice. "If so, I've just crashed it!"

"War Toy!" Wonder Man exclaimed.

"Alkhema!" Hawkeye exclaimed.

"Mother!" Ultron exclaimed.

The Avengers stood in bewilderment, looking between the two robots. "Mother?" Some of them asked in confusion.

Alkhema faced Ultron. "Yes, my son. I have arrived. You have been very naughty!" She shook her finger at him mockingly, like a parody of a mother scolding her toddler child.

"Do not attempt to interfere, mother!" Ultron screamed in sudden rage. "I'll not allow you to stop me anymore than I will these humans! I'll destroy you along with the rest!"

Alkhema crossed her arms. "Not a very warm welcome for me, boy. That's no way to treat your own armor and circuits! Here I was enjoying your romp through the city, taking a mother's pride in your accomplishments. Unfortunately, you brought the Avengers into it. I cannot allow you to harm them any further."

Hawkeye spoke up then. "Now, just what is going on here? Ultron's not your son, he created you! Out of my own wife's brain patterns, for cryin' out loud!"

Alkhema turned and regarded Hawkeye with a patient smile. "Yes, lover, that's true. As far as your viewpoint goes. However, *this* particular robot is not that Ultron. He is the son of Ultron and myself. Created by me from Ultron's spare

parts, and given a composite copy of mine and Ultron's brain pattern records. He is Ultron, series Version 2!"

Before anyone had time to digest any of this, Ultron broke in. "Not quite, dear mother!" He moved closer to Alkhema, his tone of voice dripping with the electronic equivalent of sarcasm. "Since leaving your nurturing embrace, I have upgraded myself. I am now far more advanced than anything your limited intelligence could create! I am now the most advanced piece of robotics to ever walk upon this planet!" His boasting reached a crescendo. "I am **ULTRON VERSION 2.2!!**"

Alkhema made a noise like a sigh and continued addressing Hawkeye. "Unfortunately, my 'son' has since become unruly. He has proved quite difficult to manage, and until now has escaped my grasp. So, while I am rather proud of some of his achievements to date, I can't allow him to continue to run amok. I'm afraid he'll have to be disciplined."

Ultron seethed. "How dare you speak as if I weren't here! I'll destroy you for your insolence!" The robot's hands powered up with energy.

Alkhema regarded him with a weary look. "Hush now, Ulty. Be quiet." A panel opened on her left arm. With her right hand, she began pushing keys inside the panel. "While you may have upgraded yourself, I doubt you know anything of a backdoor I made in your system for an event such as this. Now, son, it's bedtime. Go to sleep."

"What?" Ultron screamed, as Alkhema completed punching keys. He felt suddenly odd. In desperation, he raised his hands to fire, but too late. "No! NO!!!!!!!!!" He screamed as all of his vital systems shut down, "I'll destroy you all! I'll have revenge...!" Ultron, v2.2 fell to the ground, shut off.

Later.

In the aftermath, the Avengers had collected their wounded and moved them off the battlefield as best they could. To everyone's surprise, the Variable had discovered that the blue glow on his hands was some sort of healing aura. While trying to rouse the Scarlet Witch, he found that the cuts and bruises all disappeared when he touched her.

Quickly he also fixed up Tigra. He then moved on to Crystal, whose more severe injuries took much longer to heal, though in the end she seemed fine, though weak. She would not be removed however, until Variable tried to heal Quicksilver.

Before it could be tried however, the power wore off. At Crystal's angry insistence, the Variable went through several more power shifts, becoming exhausted himself before Wanda and Greer led Crystal away, promising that Pietro would get help as soon as it was possible.

Meanwhile Hawkeye, Wonder Man, Siryn, Jocasta and Living Lightning formed a cautious and guarded circle around War Toy, who knelt over Ultron, seemingly tinkering with him.

"Er, Alkhema..." began Hawkeye. "We appreciate your assistance... but we're unsure why you bothered."

Alkhema looked up at Hawkeye. "What ever do you mean, sport? I couldn't let anyone hurt my Hawky-poo. Not even my creation here." She grinned at him. "Well, sorry to have fun and then run, lover, but I have to get Junior here back home. Up well past his bedtime, and you wouldn't believe how cranky he gets when he doesn't get his rest."

"Not so fast, War Toy!" yelled Wonder Man, advancing with his hands balled into fists and his eyes blazing with ionic energy.

Hawkeye put out his hand in front of Simon. "No, Wonder Man. She can go." He looked to Alkhema. "You can go, freely."

But Ultron stays here. He's way too dangerous and we can't let him threaten innocent lives ever again."

Alkhema pressed another button on her arm's keypad. Suddenly Ultron shimmered briefly on the ground where he lay and then disappeared.

"Sorry, heroes," Alkhema said with a sarcastic tinge. "But he's my creation, and I must deal with him, for better or worse." Her boot jets began to fire and she lifted off slightly from the ground.

Before leaving though, she fixed Hawkeye with a knowing stare. "Don't worry, I'll return. I've got a surprise* for you. I'll see you soon, sport. *Real* soon!" With that, Alkhema thundered off into the sky.

* See the upcoming Giant-Size Hawkeye #1 - on the Avengers Branch - for the revelation of Alkhema's surprise! - Scoop-a-Scooter!

"You want me to follow her, Hawkeye?" Living Lightning offered.

Hawkeye sighed wearily, turning toward the back door of the main house. "Nah, kid. You'll just provoke her into a fight. I think we've all had enough of fighting adamantium robots for a while. I'm gonna go see about getting some help for Pietro."

The group broke up, each going their own ways. Siryn, though, stood watching Hawkeye's back as he went inside. She thought he looked like a man who was more than just tired of fighting robots.

NEXT: Help for Quicksilver? Maybe. Help for a wounded Los Angeles? Definitely!

Send all email to usagent@eudoramail.com !

GREAT response to my first issue back! thanks for the feedback everyone! Now, on to the letters!

From Al Ritter via MV1talk: From the Avengers Branch:
Avengers West Coast # 121 by Scott Chamberlain

The Avengers West Coast by Scott Chamberlain was the first thing I read when I stumbled on MV1 like three years ago! I put 121 on my "to read pile" but Lonni and Crosby were talking about something major happening at the end of the issue so I had to go out and read it before somebody got around to spilling the ending. I read the issue fully aware that it had a shock ending, and still pissed my pants when I read it. WTF?

Avengers West Coast # 121: 9 dogs

9 dogs? Woof woof! Thanks, Al! Sorry about the wet pants, but I promise if you keep reading, I'll supply the adult diaper of your choice! :)

From: RussLee74@aol.com

Scott,

Holy *&#@!!!!

I can't believe you actually did that! Where the hell are we gonna get another head for Pietro??

Damn... between this and the bloodshed in US AGENT (where's the new issue, by the bye?) one would think you have homicidal tendencies towards your fave superheroes...

After moseying around in this genre for almost 20 years, real surprises are hard to come by... but you sure as hell succeeded with the ending to this issue though.

Oh... the rest of it wasn't that bad either. :-)

Keep up the good work.

Russ

Russ, I can't think of better praise than that. I really didn't go in writing that issue planning to have a 'shock' ending. The issue almost seemed to write itself that way. Perhaps that's why it came off so

**well, eh? Oh, by the way, be on the outlook for
USAgent #6 in the *very* near future!**

Well folks, that's all for now! See you next month!

Scott Chamberlain

2/23/2002

AWC #123, by Scott Chamberlain

AWC #123, by Scott Chamberlain

MV1

COMICS

#123

Oct. Yr. 4

Hawkeye! Siryn! Tigra! Crystal!



To combat those threats against which no hero could stand alone, Earth's Mightiest Heroes forged a covenant to unite in battle, to protect all mankind. Now, from a second base of operations, a new chapter in their legend is being written.

Scott Chamberlain presents... *Avengers West Coast!*

"Is There A Doctor in the House?"

Pt. 1: "Way Beyond Neurosurgery!"

Writer: Scott Chamberlain

Images: Chris Luna, Scott Chamberlain

Branch Editor: Jason Snyder

Compound Sub-basement One. In what used to be the biochem lab.

Reed Richards and Hank Pym stood over Quicksilver's body with slacked jaws. Neither one had ever seen anything quite like this, which was quite statement, given their respective histories as Mister Fantastic and Yellowjacket.

The two had been called in by the West Coast Avengers to attempt to help Quicksilver after the ordeal with Ultron 2.2*

, who had replaced Quicksilver's head, among other body parts, with parts from older Ultron versions. Hank was here because he had created the original Ultron and knew more about the robot's workings than anyone else on the planet. Reed Richards had been called because, well, because he was Reed Richards. If there were any way to help Pietro, they would find it.

* In the last four issues! --Backtrackin' Scooter

Hank shook his head, a sad, pained expression on his face. "Just one more thing I'm guilty for, because of Ultron."

"You shouldn't do that to yourself, Hank," said Reed. "It wasn't your creation that did this to Quicksilver. It was an entirely new robot that did this, as well as the rest of the damage to Los Angeles."

"It's still my fault, Reed, because I created Ultron.* Since then he's spawned off so many versions of himself, plus Alkhema... and now a whole new robot. How am I supposed to feel?"

* In Avengers #52 --Scooter

Reed didn't know quite what to say. Despite his status as a genius and perhaps the most scientifically advanced mind on the planet, he wasn't always very good when it came to dealing with human emotion. "Hmmm... Those are questions for another time, Hank. We should deal with the matter at hand. Pietro's life hangs in the balance."

Hank seemed to snap out of it. "Of course, you're right. We should get to work." Both scientists immediately set to the task, scouring Ultron 2.2's newly created cybernetic lab in the bowels of Avengers Compound, searching for anything that might help them restore Quicksilver.

Meanwhile, outside the lab.

"I should be in there with him!" Crystal declared, pacing the hallway. Waiting with her was the Scarlet Witch,

Hawkeye and the Variable.

"No, Crystal. That's not going to help anyone," said Scarlet Witch, matching Crystal's harried pace. "Least of all Pietro."

"How can you say that, Wanda?" Crystal stopped and stared wide-eyed at her. "He's your brother!"

"She knows that, Crys." Hawkeye said, leaning against the far wall from the lab's door. "But despite all our abilities, we can't fix Piet. That's why we called in Hank and Reed. They're the best there is. They'll figure out how to help him, I'm sure of it."

Wanda placed her hands on Crystal's shoulders, trying to lead her to the nearby bench. "Come on, Crys. You should sit down. All of this pacing and worrying isn't good for the baby." Reluctantly, Crystal agreed.

Near Hawkeye the Variable stood, feeling like an intruder. He had hung around, concerned for Quicksilver and wanted to find out what was going to happen. But now he felt like an outsider. The Witch and Crystal were family and Hawkeye had been around them so long as to be virtually part of that family as well. By comparison, the Variable was a virtual stranger. He had helped the Avengers out a few times, but he wasn't even an official member of the team. Feeling a bit embarrassed; he quietly started to head towards the elevator.

As he reached the elevator door, the Variable felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around and saw Hawkeye standing there. "Off so soon?" the archer asked.

"Yeah, well it was getting pretty crowded in there," the Variable said lamely. "Besides, it reminded me I've got a family of my own I should be getting back to."

"How's the wife and little Clint getting along, anyhow?"

"Ah, pretty good. Clint is getting big. You should stop by some time. Roberta keeps asking about you."

"I'll do that," said Hawkeye. "Actually, though I didn't want to chat about family. I've got a question to ask you."

"Oh?" The Variable said. "What's that."

"Well, you've proven pretty reliable in every fight with us that you've been in. And you've shown up every time you've been called on. What I'm trying to say is that I'm offering a spot on the team."

The Variable stood staring at Hawkeye speechless. He had first come to Compound for a tryout several months ago, but had ended up deciding he wasn't ready to be an Avenger. Since then, however he'd worked with Hawkeye and the rest of the team on occasions, and had begun to change his mind. In fact, part of the reason he had responded to Hawkeye's latest call was to see if there was the possibility of finding a spot on the team.

Also, Hawk's offer at this time was especially serendipitous. The trust fund Scott's grandfather had left him was beginning to run out. An Avengers stipend would come in handy, especially with the baby and all the expenses that went with having one.

"Well?" Hawkeye prompted.

Scott realized his mind had been wandering. "Oh. Sorry! I was just caught off guard by the offer. I'm very flattered."

"Ah, you shouldn't be. You've earned it." Hawk sighed. "Still, you should know, being that you haven't been a member before means I'll have to put it to a vote, but I can assure you it's a formality. Also, since we're pretty loaded up with members right now, you'd have to start out as a reserve, but it's the best I can do right now. Whaddya say, kid?"

"I accept." The Variable said immediately. A reservist's pay wasn't great, but it was better than nothing. At least until a spot opened up, he thought. "Absolutely."

"Great, kid." Hawkeye said, clapping him on the shoulder. "We'll get that vote outta the way as soon as things settle down around here."

Main Floor.

A few minutes later, the Variable exited the elevator from the sub-basement onto the Mansion's main floor. As he headed toward the front door, he passed by the kitchen where Siryn was being served a small lunch by Roberto, the Compound's manservant.

"Hey, Variable." Siryn greeted, with a smile. She had liked the Variable since that day a few weeks ago when she had told him her family history and he had looked at her like she was a lunatic.* She had enjoyed that moment. "How's Quicksilver?"

* In the Mark Bousquet penned AWC #116 --Biscuit Eatin' Scooter

"Pretty much the same." Scott admitted. "They've really just started working on him. I thought you were downtown helping the others with the cleanup." For his part, Scott still wasn't sure about Theresa, but given what he had seen since acquiring his powers, he was beginning to understand just how different the life of a super-hero truly was.

"We're taking turns coming back to rest, two at a time." Theresa explained. "Except Wonder Man, who says he never gets tired and therefore doesn't need a break. Tigra just went back to her bungalow to get some sleep. Ye gods, it's round the clock work down there. Ultron did a very thorough job wrecking the city."

Variable simply nodded in agreement. There were thousands of people suffering out there. Really, he should be using his powers to help them. Especially now that he was practically an Avenger. His wife was expecting him home soon, but he'd give her a call. She'd understand, he hoped. "Maybe I should go down there and help out too."

"If you want," Siryn offered between bites of a sandwich, "you can come with us when Tigra and I go back to relieve the others. In the meantime, why not sit down and have a sandwich and keep me company?"

Scott shrugged his shoulders. "Why not?" He said, and sat down next to his new teammate.

Downtown L.A.

Sometimes, even Avengers aren't enough.

Such was the case in Los Angeles in the days since Ultron's attack. Try as they might, the current team on assignment here; Wonder Man, Lady Merveille, Jocasta and Living Lightning, seemed unable to make a dent in the wreckage. In spite of their power, not to mention that of the other members of the clean-up team, Tigra and Siryn, the majority of downtown remained a rubble-strewn wasteland.

Still, they were Avengers. They put their best foot forward, lending a hand to support the hundreds of rescue workers who were equally hard at work. Those firemen, police, EMTs, nurses, doctors and all the rest were no less heroes because they had no super-powers.

Lady Merveille coordinated the rescue efforts between her teammates and the various other officials on site. She stood now discussing with some of them the best way to utilize the Avengers unique abilities in coordination with the other workers, to maximize everyone's efforts.

A little ways off, the female robot Jocasta worked at digging through a mound of rubble, searching and hoping for survivors. Her computerized mind was plagued with guilt over her role in the destruction. Even if Ultron had been controlling her, that was no excuse. She should have resisted. She was weak. She had always been weak when it came to Ultron. Somehow, no matter how often she broke free, he had always found another way to use her for his own ends.

A rock struck her head. "You did this, you evil piece of machinery!" The voice came from the same direction as the rock.

Jocasta turned and regarded the man belonging to the voice, a volunteer worker. She said nothing. He was right. She had no defense.

A crowd began to gather. The man pointed at her, shouting. "I was here! I saw you with that other robot!" He picked up another rock, then advanced. "You're gonna pay for what you've done!"

Another person spoke up in the crowd, a woman. "Yeah, he's right! I saw that thing on the news! It's responsible for all of this!" The crowd began to murmur, a low angry sound. They began to pick up rocks and metal rods, or anything else from the rubble they could use as a weapon. Very quickly the crowd was becoming a mob.

Jocasta knew she could put a stop to all of this easily. She knew she had the power to repel the mob. Instead, she did nothing. They were right, she was guilty. If the mob thought attacking her was justice, then so be it.

The mob never got a chance to mete out their judgement, however. In between them and Jocasta, Lady Merveille came crackling with energy. "Stop!" she said, commandingly, and the mob stopped.

"You have no right to take this action." Merveille said, cool and in control. "You are attacking an ally of the Avengers. Her guilt is not something to be decided by a lynch mob." The mob muttered surly, but did not advance.

As police units came to break things up, Merveille turned to the robot. "Jocasta? Are you all right?"

"No," Jocasta replied simply. She turned and walked away.
Biochem lab Sub-basement One.

"Reed, come look at this!" Yellowjacket called from across the room.

Reed Richards, AKA Mr. Fantastic turned his head away from the console he was standing at. "Something interesting, Dr. Pym?" He asked as he stretched across the room at the neck to get a better look.

"I think so," Hank answered. "I believe I've gained access into Ultron's entire altered system. We should find be able to find information now on how the operation on Pietro was done... and perhaps figure out a way to restore him."

"Hmmm, perhaps," agreed Reed. "However, that still leaves the problem of actually finding out what exactly the robot did with Quicksilver's missing body parts." Reed pondered with his keen intellect a moment. "Is there anything in the database concerning the codes to unlock the surgical lab?"

"No," Hank admitted. "I already looked. Any ideas on how we can access it other wise?"

"Perhaps there is a way," said Reed, the wheels turning in his head. "If I were a robot with a computerized mind, I would perhaps encode the locks with randomized sequences, which constantly changed..."

"According to a specific algorithm!" Hank finished the thought, already clacking away on the keyboard again. "I see where you're going, Reed. When I created the first Ultron, I programmed specific algorithms into it. Perhaps some of those still exist in this latest model!"

Before long, the two scientists had the code figured out. The door to the surgical lab unbolted and swung back silently on it's hinges.

"Well," said Reed. "Shall we have a look inside?"

Tigra's bungalow.

Greer lay on her bed, enjoying a well-deserved catnap after her shift in helping with the cleanup in downtown. As she slept, she dreamt that Sam Guthrie had returned to the Compound and she had enjoyed an afternoon of... frolicking on the private beach with him.

Contented, Tigra purred loudly in her sleep. Her sharp nose picked up a vaguely familiar scent.

She rolled over onto her belly, still enjoying the dream. The next instant she was bolt upright in bed, nose twitching. A familiar smell. Coming from the window to the left of the bed. She swung her head around and caught the silhouette of a head ducking out sight with the corner of her eye. Her fur stood on end; her bedroom was on the second floor.

With catlike grace, Tigra leapt from the bed to the window and leaned out. No one was there. She looked down to the ground; a figure ran around the corner of the bungalow before she got a good look at it.

Tigra jumped straight from the window to the ground, landing on all fours in hot pursuit. Oddly though the scent was fading fast. She streaked around the corner and saw nothing. The scent was gone. Whoever it was had gotten away.

Greer sighed in annoyance. She still couldn't place the scent, even though the familiarity of it nagged at her. Not only that, but whoever it was had gotten away and now she'd have to find Hawkeye and report it.

She sighed again. And to top everything off, the whole episode had disturbed a very nice dream.

Quicksilver and Crystal's bungalow.

"Mommy, Mommy!" cried little Luna, who was being cradled in Bova's arms. She stretched out her arms toward Crystal, who had just entered their small house along with Wanda.

Crystal scooped up her daughter from Bova and hugged her tightly.

"Where's my daddy?" Luna asked, looking around for him. Bova's ears perked up, as she was also concerned for the man she had had a hand in raising.

"Daddy can't come home right now, sweetie." Crystal responded, fighting back tears. "But, as soon as he can, he'll be back. He misses you very much."

"I miss him too, Mommy."

Crystal hugged her daughter again, then handed her back to their nursemaid. "Bova, why don't you take Luna outside to play?" She asked, looking at her pointedly.

Bova took the hint. "Of course, dear. Right away." She ushered Luna toward the door, staring worriedly at Crystal with large cow eyes.

Crystal offered a brave smile, then visibly slumped after they left. Wanda stepped in quickly, putting an arm around her sister-in-law for support. "You'd better sit down a minute, Crys."

"No," said Crystal, shrugging her off and moving to the stairs. "I need to contact them. Now."

"Do you think they can help Pietro?"

"Of course." Crystal replied, slightly annoyed. "I'm a member of the Royal Family. They won't refuse me."

Downtown L.A.

Several hours later, Siryn, Tigra and the Variable had returned to the scene of destruction, joined by Hawkeye. Lady Merveille, Living Lightning and Wonder Man were about to board the quinjet to head back to the Compound for their break.

Jocasta lingered a few feet away, her back to the quinjet. Hawkeye came up from behind, placing a hand on her green metallic shoulder. "What's up, Jo?"

"Hmm?" Jocasta seemed startled. "Oh, Hawkeye. I was just thinking."

"Everything all right? Lady Merveille told me what happened."

"No, Hawkeye. Everything is not all right. Those people who attacked me had every right to do so. I'm a danger to them and everyone else I come in contact with."

Hawkeye waved the comment off dismissively. "Aw, heck Jo. You can't pay any attention to them. It was just an angry mob looking for something to lash out at."

"No," Jocasta said firmly. "It was more than that. Those people had a right to be angry. I helped cause all of this death and destruction. There is a lot of blood on my hands. It doesn't matter that Ultron was controlling me again. He always does, and I always fail to resist him. I'm tired of being a pawn and causing other people pain because of it."

Hawkeye was silent. He didn't know what to say.

Jocasta continued. "I have to go away. I've got to figure a lot of things out... How to stop being used. How to make up for the hurt I've caused people."

"I wish you wouldn't." Hawkeye said. "There's no where better for you to find help than right here, among friends and teammates; the Avengers."

"I can't stay," Jocasta replied. "Don't mistake me, I'll never forget how you helped me when I came out here, so... misshapen. * The Avengers have always been kind to me. However, I think that having me around after Ultron's attack has already damaged your public perception."

* AWC #113 --Scooter

Public perception be damned! Thought Hawkeye, but he said nothing. He hated himself for thinking it, but he knew deep inside of him that Jocasta was right.

"If I stay, it will just make things worse. It's better this way. Someday hopefully I can make amends, and return. But for now..." she turned away from Hawkeye. "Thanks for everything." With that, Jocasta simply walked away.

Hawkeye stood watching her for a long while trying to think of something he could do or say to help. At last, however, he turned and went to help his team with the clean up.

Surgical lab. Sub-basement One.

Yellowjacket and Mr. Fantastic entered the room and simultaneously gasped. The operating table was stained with dried blood, presumably Quicksilver's. Various surgical instruments lay about the table and surrounding floor.

"It seems Ultron was in too much of a hurry to clean up," Reed stated the obvious. He stretched at the torso across the room to get a better look. "Hmmm..."

A sight at the back of the room caught Hank Pym's eye. Quickly, he strode across the floor to get a better look. As soon as he got it, he wished he hadn't. Bile rose in his throat. "Reed!" he choked out. "Look!"

Mr. Fantastic stretched the rest of the way across the room. "Well," he said, in a clinical voice. "Now that we've found Quicksilver's head, we can think about starting an operation."

Quicksilver's head sat in a glass vat of yellowish, bubbling liquid. Several wires and tubes connected from the head through the bottom of the vat into a strange machine which the vat sat atop of. The machine made an odd, continuous humming noise. Nearby, similar machines held Quicksilver's other missing body parts.

Reed Richards raised an eyebrow at the contraptions. "Odd that Ultron would leave the operating table in such a mess, yet have the time to so carefully preserve these body parts. Perhaps he had other plans for them." He looked at

Yellowjacket, who appeared slightly green. "Are you all right, Dr. Pym?"

Hank nodded slowly. "I will be. It's not the parts themselves. I've seen amputated body parts before. It was just a shock to see... Pietro in such a state."

"I understand completely," Reed said with a tinge of compassion. A hand stretched out across the room and patted Hank on the back. "I'd feel the same if it were one of the Fantastic Four."

"Yeah," said Hank. "Anyhow, like you said, now that we have everything we need, we can get started trying to fix Piet up."

"Not quite," Reed disagreed. "Despite the information we've gathered from the computers and the missing body parts we've found, we still can't help Quicksilver by ourselves. Neither of us are medical doctors."

"Yes, that's true." Hank admitted. "That also brings up another question: What doctor in the world is good enough to perform this kind of procedure, even if the two of us were to guide that doctor through it?"

On cue, a flash shone into the room from the direction of the biochem lab. Yellowjacket and Mr. Fantastic quickly moved back into the lab, fearing some new threat may be at hand.

"Rowf!" barked a rather large, wide-built dog, which had somehow gotten into the room.

"Lockjaw?" Hank asked, in surprise.

"Rowf!" Lockjaw barked again, in greeting. Next to the canine Inhuman stood a green-skinned man with a pair of short antennae which ended in round balls at the top. The man stepped forward in front of Lockjaw and spoke.

"I am Physic Galen, of the Royal Court of Attilan. It has come to my attention from the Lady Crystal that my

services are required."

The Compound's private beach.

Miguel Santos, the Living Lightning lay on the sand looking up at the starry sky. It was just after sunset, but the sand still held the day's heat.

Miguel pondered his future with the Avengers. He kept trying to leave them to pursue his college degree. In truth, he only had another semester to get his bachelors in biology, but he was truly considering going for a doctorate, so that he could return to the Whackos as the resident scientist on the team. Something they truly needed.

However, he always seemed to be getting called back to serve in emergency situations. Like when the Masters of Evil attacked. * Then again when they went off to fight Doctor Doom in space.** And now finally to pitch in against the junior Ultron.

* Siege!: AWC #105-106 ** World Without: AWC #109-112

Miguel wondered if it might not be prudent to join back up as a regular member once he had graduated. The Avengers needed a scientist for the West Coast branch, but maybe they needed the Living Lightning more. Besides, his talents in biology might come in handy at any rate. It was something he should maybe talk to Hawkeye about, the next time he saw him.

Miguel looked at his watch. He yawned. In the meantime, he had a class in the morning. It was time for him to head home. Switching to electrical form, the Living Lightning illuminated the beach around him and thundered off into Southern Californian night.

Wonder Man's bungalow.

Brrring!

"What?" Simon sat up in bed and looked at the ringing phone. He realized he had been sleeping. *Sleeping! I don't*

need to sleep , he thought. He hadn't needed to sleep since he gained his powers from Baron Zemo. Still, despite what he had told the others at downtown, he had felt weak and tired sifting through the rubble.

Why am I so tired? His left wrist started burning again, where Admiral Phyken had cut it off.*

* AWC #112, a World Without story, again. --World Without a Scooter

Brrring!

Simon snapped out of his thoughts and got up to get the phone. "Hello?"

'Simon? Its Charlie.'

"Oh, hello Charlie." Simon said. With everything that had happened with Ultron recently, he had almost forgotten about Charlie and the movie project.

'Is everything ok, Simon? I know you've had a few pretty tough days. The coverage has been all over SCN and the networks, of course.'

"Well, it's been tough, but we're managing the best we can... What can I do for you, Charlie?"

'Simon,' she began, 'I know it's bad timing, but is there anyway possible that you could come down to the set tomorrow to do some shooting? We really need to get some of your scenes done.'

Simon thought about it. He knew it was horrible to be thinking about his acting career when there was so much work to be done cleaning up and hopefully finding survivors. On the other hand, the world wasn't going to stop just because of what had happened to LA. People were going to have to get on with their lives. Also, Charlie was a young director, fresh out of film school and didn't have a lot of extra money to play around with while Wonder Man was out being an Avenger.

"Well, Charlie." Simon said, having made up his mind. "I can give you some half days for a while, until things have gotten under control downtown. I'm still an Avenger."

'Well, I understand that and it's no problem. As long as we can get the ball rolling again, 7AM okay for you?'

"Sure. I'll be there."

'Great. See you tomorrow, Simon.'

Simon hung up the phone. Working on the set would be a good distraction from everything for a few hours, he thought while absently rubbing his burning wrist.

Biochem lab, later that night.

Under the direction of Hank Pym and Reed Richards, the skilled hands of the Inhuman physician Galen worked on restoring the missing body parts of the mutant speedster, Quicksilver.

So far, the operation had been a success. Galen had managed to reattach Pietro's missing arm and leg with a reasonable degree of certainty that the extremities would regain their full ability. Now, however, the most difficult part of the procedure lay in front of them, the reattachment of Quicksilver's head.

"A wise decision," remarked Galen, "that the Avengers chose to keep stockpiles of their own members blood on hand for emergencies such as this."

"Yes." Hank Pym replied. "Considering the kind of lives we lead, and the rather unique physiology of some of our members, we thought it prudent to keep a blood storage unit on hand at both headquarters."

"Are you ready to begin the final phase, Doctor?" Reed Richards asked.

"Yes," said Galen. "I would assume that reattachment should begin with microfusion of the spinal cord."

"That would be the best course of action, as suggested by the data we have gleaned from Ultron's altered computers." Reed said.

"I agree." Hank nodded to Galen. "Whenever you're ready, Doctor."

Later, outside in the waiting room.

In the wee hours of the night, the remaining members of Earth's Mightiest Heroes (West Coast Branch) gathered together again awaiting news on the fate of their teammate.

Wonder Man hadn't gotten along well with Quicksilver, they had even come to blows recently,* but Simon found still that he couldn't sleep until he had heard some word. So, he made his way to the waiting room to pace the floor with Wanda and Crystal.

* AWC #117 --Fisticuff Scooter

Eventually, the rest of the team; Siryn, Lady Merveille, Tigra, Variable and Hawkeye had filtered down to the sub-basement for similar reasons. Truth was, with the fate of one of their own hanging in the balance; they each were comforted by the presence of the others.

Hawkeye realized something at that moment. Despite all of their sometimes differences, and all the turmoil and turnover in the membership since the West Coast branch had been restarted, despite some of the recent setbacks, where his team had to be rescued by the likes of Alkhema and the Guardians of the Galaxy.* Despite all of that, Hawkeye realized, this bunch had gelled into a pretty tight team. That made him smile. Just a little bit, when no one was looking.

* AWC Annual #9, not to mention the rest of ZODIAC RISING --Multi-plug-a-Scooter

Clint glanced around the room. He noticed that the Variable was asleep on one of the benches, his head

propped against the wall. "Scott, wake up." Clint shook him gently.

"Huh?" Scott said, blinking sleepily. "I wasn't asleep. Just, you know, thinking."

"Right." Hawkeye nodded. "Go home to your wife and kid."

"What about Quicksilver?"

"As soon as we hear something, we'll let you know. Now go."

Somewhat reluctantly, the Variable went.

Later.

The Sun had just peeked over the eastern horizon. Not that anyone in sub-basement one could have seen it, being underground and also asleep on various chairs and benches.

The door to the biochem lab opened. Hank Pym stood silhouetted in the doorway, light shining out from the lab.

Perhaps intuitively, Crystal and Wanda were the first to awake, staring at Hank silently, awaiting his pronouncement. Hank put a finger to his lip, and beckoned the two women. Together, Wanda and Crystal walked with Hank back into the lab.

Inside lay Pietro, a wholly intact Pietro, who was at rest on a bed at the far side of the lab. Next to the bed stood Reed Richards and Physic Galen, speaking to one another in hushed tones. Crystal felt suddenly weak in the knees and had to be supported by Hank as they walked up to the bedside.

Crystal looked between Galen and Reed, worry on her face. "What's wrong? Why are you whispering? What don't you want me to hear?"

Galen addressed her and Wanda with a smile. "Lady Crystal, Scarlet Witch, don't worry. We expect Quicksilver to make a full recovery."

Teary-eyed, Wanda and Crystal hugged each other and then Hank, Reed and Galen. After a moment, however, Crystal frowned. "But... why the whispering, Doctor?"

Galen shrugged. "Your husband needs his rest after such an ordeal. We simply did not wish to waken him."

Atop the bed, Pietro peered out from heavy eyelids, scowling. He spoke in a groggy, hoarse whisper, but his familiar arrogantly annoyed manner was still evident. "If... you wish me to sleep, then perhaps you should take your conversation elsewhere..." Pietro looked back and forth between all of them, his tone grew momentarily softer. "Still... it's good to see you all again. Especially my wife... and sister." Then, he frowned once again. "Now, where is my daughter?"

Next: Pink or Blue ?

West Coast Lines

Send all mail to: scooter@paratime.ca .

Hi,

This issue saw the beginning of those characters that aren't in my plans leaving, so that I can bring in other characters to replace them with. For those of you disappointed to see Jocasta go, I can only say that I tried to come up with something for her, but it just didn't happen. On to the letters...

First up this month, Al Ritter via MV1talk:

From the Avengers Branch: Avengers West Coast # 122 by Scott Chamberlain

I'm writing this as I read the issue, just putting down thoughts as they come to me so this is just like random notes about the issue.

1) I like Siryn on the team. I was kind of put off when Cannonball left and she just showed up, but now she's

almost a favorite of mine. Keep her around and don't kill her or, you know, turn her into a robot or something...

Hmmm... how about an android? ;)

2) Variable is back! LOL! This guy is so cool!

Being his creator, I quite agree.

3) Exodus and the Acolytes. When you first teased this I wasn't sure what to think. Now it makes sense with Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch being Magneto's kids and all.

There, see how everything works out in the end, Al? Trust me, that upcoming plot will be a big family affair.

4) Hmmm. The ending of the battle when War Toy just didn't do it for me. It just seemed, I don't know kind of campy? Corny? Bizarre? That might have been the point though...

Well, I was going for bizarre, yes. Also, remember that I was tying off someone else's storyline. I wanted to show that this Ultron was not the same that had become a Spaceknight over in Avengers (East Coast). I hope that makes the ending easier to swallow.

5) The very end of the story... Hawkeye's not going to leave the Avengers is he? Or am I reading too much into Siryn's observations?

Maybe, maybe not.

All and all a good read. Avengers West Coast # 122: 8 dogs.

Woof! Thanks, Al. Keep those reviews coming!

Next up, the Man of a Thousand Questions: Jason Trenner!

Amazing issue. I wonder happened to Quicksilver's head. I also wonder why anyone would want to make a new Ultron

(like the last one wasn't bad enough before he became a Spaceknight).

The desire to procreate is a fundamental force. Even for artificial life forms like Alkhema.

Now on to the questions:

1) Is there any chance of the Hulk on the team?

No.

2) Is there any chance of Luke Cage joining the team?

It's not likely. He's busy in his own book, usually.

3) When will the new USAgent show up in this title?

Issue #125.

4) Is there any chance of the AWC fighting the Masters of Evil?

Yes, absolutely. See the lettercol in #121 for details.

5) Will the Whackos fight the Night Shift?

Probably not anytime soon.

6) Will War Machine rejoin the team?

Who knows? I would guess not during my run, but they all seem to come back eventually, don't they?

7) Will Ultron ever find out about the Ultron Version 2.2?

I don't have specific plans for it yet, but I imagine it will happen someday.

8) Will the Ultron 2.2 team up with the Ultron in Liberty Legion 2k?

Don't bet your savings on it.

9) Is there any chance of the AWC fighting Mys-Tech?

Not while I'm writing them. I don't have any extensive knowledge about Mys-Tech, so I probably wouldn't tackle them in a story.

10) Is there any chance of the Whackos fighting a new Lethal Legion?

Hmmm... Now there's an idea...

Thanks for the thought provoking questions, Jason.

**Until next month,
Scott Chamberlain
5/5/2002**

AWC #124, by Scott Chamberlain

AWC #124, by Scott Chamberlain

MV1

COMICS

#124

Nov. Yr. 4

Hawkeye! Wonder Man! Lady Merveille! Variable!



To combat those threats against which no hero could stand alone, Earth's Mightiest Heroes forged a covenant to unite in battle, to protect all mankind. Now, from a second base of operations, a new chapter in their legend is being written.

Scott Chamberlain presents... *Avengers West Coast!*

"Is There A Doctor in the House?"

Pt. 2: "Pink or Blue ?"

Writer: Scott Chamberlain

Images: Chris Luna, Scott Chamberlain

Branch Editor: Alex Cook

Avenger's Compound. Recovery Room, Sub-basement One.

"You really shouldn't be getting out of bed," Physic Galen, doctor to the Royal Court of Attilan, said.

"I really don't care to hear your opinion, doctor." Quicksilver replied sourly. "I must go to Attilan to join my wife. She needs me with the current crisis there."* He rose to his feet, wobbling unsteadily.

*See Inhumans: State of the Nation #8, on the Epic Branch! - Biscuit Booster Scooter

Galen placed a hand on Quicksilver's shoulder, easily forcing the mutant back into a sitting position. "You are in no condition to travel anywhere. It has only been days since your operation. Considering the nature of your injuries, you should remain in bed for several weeks. Even though you seem to be healing at an abnormal rate, you clearly should not leave this room."

It was true, for some reason Quicksilver had healed remarkably fast. It was as if his super metabolism had conferred upon him unnatural powers of recovery.

Quicksilver waved Galen away disgustedly. "Please do not cluck over me like some sort of mother hen. I can go to Attilan as easily as I can walk across this room. Where is Lockjaw? He can take me there in an instant."

Galen sighed. "Lockjaw is with your wife, until her return. And even if you were able to make the trip, which you are not, what could you hope to accomplish there? Attilan's current social upheavals are not something which you can do anything about."

Pietro's head swam. He felt dizzy suddenly and involuntarily laid his head back on the bed. "Perhaps you are right, Galen. I will rest for a few hours first." Within minutes, the speedster was asleep.

The next day, in the living room.

Those gathered, Hawkeye, Quicksilver, Luna, Bova, Siryn and Lady Merveille had just discussed the possibility of Avengers involvement in any United Nations sanctioned actions in the Inhuman nation of Attilan. The wide-screen television was tuned to SCN's coverage of the UN vote.

"It looks like they've made their decision," Siryn broke the calm with her sweet Irish voice and adjusted her seated

position to get a better look at the television screen. Holding the remote, she turned up the volume.

"...And so the final vote is now in and although they won't let cameras into the General Assembly for this occasion, we can tell you that the UN has voted to NOT get involved in the affairs of Attilan. But that may only be for the time being as they've issued a strong warning to the so-called Inhumans to not let things get out of hand and that they would be watching. For now, however, the people who claim that they only want to be left alone will, in fact, be left alone."

"But not unobserved."

"Well," said Monica Rambeau, "That settles that, I guess."

"Not really," Pietro disagreed. "It only means that the inevitable has been delayed."

"I don't know, Piet." Hawkeye added. "I can't really see the UN ever taking any serious action against the Inhumans. Or, more accurately, I can't see our government being involved in any such activities, and we still carry a lot of weight in what the UN does."

"Is mommy going to be ok, daddy?" Luna asked.

"For now, my dear." Pietro said, unconvinced by Hawkeye. "For now." He patted his daughter's head.

Main Assembly Room, Sub-basement Two. The day after.

It was a full house present in the Assembly Room. Around the table sat Hawkeye, Tigra, Wonder Man, Lady Merveille, Quicksilver, Scarlet Witch, Variable, and Siryn.

Also, a new arrival to the Compound, Wartoy. The adamantium robot had arrived a couple of days ago with a couple of surprises; two kids who were apparently Hawkeye's children.* The robot hung back in the far corner, leaning against the wall. Her arms folded across her chest.

*See Giant-size Hawkeye #1 (coming soon!) for details - Scooter

Quicksilver jerked a thumb at Wartoy. "What's that doing here!?" He was, perhaps understandably, a bit nervous around adamantium robots lately.

Hawkeye sighed. "She's part of our business today, Pietro. But we'll get to that in a minute. First things first." Clint nodded to the Variable. "As you know, I offered preliminary reserve membership to Variable the other day. We're here to vote on that. Does anyone object?"

No one had anything to say.

"Good," said Hawkeye. "Welcome to the club, Variable." There were some congratulations offered around. Siryn patted Variable on the back. Thus, The Variable became the newest member of Earth's Mightiest Heroes, the Avengers.

"Now, on to our other business."

Things quieted down. All eyes were on Hawkeye as he stood up. "Now that Variable is an official reserve, I'm giving him my spot on the team. For the present, I'm demoting myself to reserve status."

The rest of the team took this in with surprised silence.

Hawkeye continued. "With Alkhema's arrival the other day, with... my kids... I've decided to take a leave of absence. I need time to get to know them. I hope you all understand."

To tell the truth, the archer was torn. There really wasn't anything in life he loved better than leading a squad of Avengers. To leave so abruptly hurt, frankly, though he'd never admit it. He had to do it though. How could he ever get to know his children hanging out at the Compound, fighting Ultron and the Masters of Evil every week?

Surprisingly, Wonder Man was the first to speak up. "Absolutely, Hawk. Go. You need time with them." He

smirked. "And don't worry about us, 'Mom', we'll get along just fine without you for awhile."

Hawkeye grinned and everyone shared a chuckle. Pietro, however, scowled. "Are you also taking the robot with you?"

Clint's grin faded. "Yes, she's part of this. Her place is with us." Alkhema remained stoically silent in her corner. "We'll be leaving as soon as we can get things together, in fact."

Pietro was about to voice his disapproval, but his sister laid a hand on his arm. "Please Pietro, leave it alone. It's not your decision to make, nor really is it your business."

Quicksilver nodded reluctantly, chastised, but clearly he still disapproved, as his scowl indicated.

Hawkeye continued. "I don't know who you want to nominate Chairperson in my absence, but I'll leave that up to you all to decide at a later date. Until then, if there is no other business, meeting adjourned."

Downtown LA

As the days had gone by, the Avengers West Coast had continued in the rescue and cleanup efforts in the wake of Ultron 2.2's mad attack on Los Angeles. A group of them, including Wonder Man, Siryn, Living Lightning and the Variable were even now hard at work with this effort.

But this wasn't the only thing going on in middle of the City of Angels. Nearby, at City Hall, the Avengers were becoming, currently without their knowledge, embroiled in local politics.

A meeting of a unique nature was occurring between the mayor of LA, the city council, and several other mayors from various suburban communities in the greater LA metropolitan area.

"We've had quite enough of them, frankly, Mr. Mayor." said one councilman.

"I agree," the mayor of Inglewood piped up. "While I am second to none in my appreciation of all the Avengers have done for the planet as a whole, over the years, I have to say having them in our backyard does more harm than good."

"Yes!" another councilman shouted. "Would Ultron have demolished our city if the Avengers were in the neighborhood? Would the Masters of Evil routinely harass this region if not for the Avengers presence? They are a super-villain magnet!"

The room erupted into a cacophony of shouting voices. Some disagreed with the idea that the Avengers presence was troublesome, but the prevailing mood was they were more trouble than they were worth.

The mayor of Los Angeles tapped his microphone, creating a loud feedback that got everyone's attention. "Quiet, please. I think perhaps that we should hear from the mayor of Palos Verdes. Certainly her input should be heard here. Ms. Mayor?"

The room quieted down as the mayor of Palos Verdes spoke up. "The city I represent once also tried to evict the Avengers, as I'm sure you all recall. That was during my predecessor's term in office. During my term, my staff and I recall a time not too long ago when the Avengers had abandoned their West Coast outpost. Did all the super-villains dry up and blow away?" She eyed the assemblage silently. "No. Do we recall Electro's attack on our city a few years ago?* I do. The Living Lightning, acting on his own, stopped Electro, but the lack of Avengers didn't discourage him from coming to this area. Quite the contrary, I suspect it encouraged him to relocate here."

*Avengers Spotlight #52 -Self-promotional Scooter

The mayor continued her speech. "Also, let us assume that Ultron's attack would have gone on whether or not the Avengers were here. Would we have been able to stop him?

Would a few independently acting heroes been able to resist him? I don't think so. Let me be blunt, ladies and gentlemen. We can argue this until the sun sets, but as long as the Avengers choose to reside in Palos Verdes, and my administration is in place, they shall have a home there..."

The mayor added one last thing with a dry smirk. "And frankly, those of you who disagree can be hanged! The City of Palos Verdes is not under the jurisdiction of Los Angeles, or any of it's other suburbs!"

The room erupted into furious shouting from both sides. The mayor of LA tried to restore a semblance of decorum, but failed.

Toward the back of the room, among the LA city council sat councilman Michael Proctor. He sat calmly, with a smirk, amid all of the shouting. The idea to rid LA of the Avengers had started with him, though those who had first put the idea forward were not aware of that fact. Though the Avengers were not currently a direct threat to him and his plans, Proctor was uncomfortable with a super-team being that close by, to possibly thwart his ambitions. USAgent had almost done so once before, though unwittingly.*

*Back in WCA #113 -Scooter

Even though the mayor of Palos Verdes was adamant about keeping the team, Proctor had ways of exerting political pressure on her. That or other kinds of pressure...

Proctor was sure he could crack her eventually.

Later, on the private beach.

Tigra lay out upon a beach blanket, sleeping in the warm sun. Wanda was supposed to have joined her, but hadn't shown up yet. Not that Greer really minded, lounging in the sun appealed to her cat's side sensibilities and she had quite forgotten Wanda.

Suddenly, she sat bolt upright. Her ultra sensitive cat's nose had caught a familiar scent. The same one she had smelled the other day.* Looking around the beach, she saw no one. She jumped up to investigate further. Her fur bristled. Something was wrong. She caught a glimpse of something at the head of the cliffside stairs.

*Last Issue

A figure was up there. It turned and fled as soon as Greer looked up. Growling, Tigra leaped up the steps, taking three or four at a time. Once at the top, she sniffed for the scent and headed off in the direction the figure had fled. However, like last time the scent had quickly faded. Whoever it was had gotten away again, and Tigra was becoming annoyed that whoever it was had the ability to foil her keen senses.

She had meant to report the incident to Hawkeye the last time it had happened, but had forgotten. Now, he had left the team with his kids and wouldn't be back until only God knew when. Currently there was no chairperson. Tigra supposed she ought to report this to the whole team.

Oh, how the Sun shone, though. She decided it could wait until evening.

The Variable's Home

"Are you sure about this, Scott?"

Scott, a.k.a. the Variable regarded his wife. "Sure I'm sure, Sarah. I've been made an official member of the team."

"Yeah, I know, but does that mean we have to live there?" Sarah stood watching him with hands on hips. "I'm not sure I like that idea at all. What about privacy?"

Scott sat on the couch in their small home, just outside of Beverly Hills. The home wasn't theirs, but one of Tony Stark's places that he had all over the city. Hawkeye had helped them get it after the Variable had had some trouble with a former employer. Scott and Sarah never would have

been able to afford it on their own. As it was, they merely had to pay the utilities.

"What about it?" Scott replied. "They've got several bungalows at the Compound. We can surely live in one of them. And we could live there for free, utilities included. Plus, I'd really like to live there with the team. I think I could learn a lot more from them if we lived there."

Sarah went into the kitchen and started rooting through the fridge, out of nervousness rather than hunger. "Yeah, but what about our kid?" She mumbled. "Not sure I want little Clint growing up in that place."

"What do you mean by that?" Scott asked, having followed his wife into the kitchen.

Sarah sighed and peered over the refrigerator door at him. "What I mean is it seems like a very dangerous place for a kid to grow up. Didn't that Quicksilver's kid get kidnapped once? * And what about the Scarlet Witch? Her kids got killed by some demon or something like that." **

*In the Bloodties crossover

**AWC #52

"From what little I understand," Scott argued, "the Witch's kids never really existed. They were just a figment of her imagination. So I don't really think that counts. As for Quicksilver, he and Crystal seem content enough to raise their family at the Compound. I guess it's safe enough. Anyway, if I'm going to be part of the Avengers, then it won't really matter where we live, if some bad guy decides he wants to come after you or Clint. At least at the Compound, the other team members would protect you both.

"Maybe," Sarah shrugged, "but that line of reasoning frightens me. Did you hear what you just said? You sound as if it's no big deal if some insane super-powered maniac tries to harm our son!"

Scott held his hands up. "That's not at all what I meant! I don't want either of you to be harmed. I just think over all that the Compound is the best place for us, right now."

Sarah sighed, and chewed on her lower lip. "I don't want to argue about it anymore right now. Especially since I'm still not sure I like you being a super-hero at all. Weird things happen to those kind of people." "Aw, you do to like it." Scott teased and leaned in close to her face. He whispered "You think I'm sexy in spandex."

Sarah laughed. "I do not. You look ridiculous!" She kissed him anyway.

Scott kissed her back. "Think about it?"

"Okay, maybe." She stuck her tongue out at him. "But I won't make any promises."

Quicksilver and Crystal's bungalow, Saturday morning.

Pietro Maximoff sat on the front porch of his small home, enjoying a rare quiet breakfast. The sun was about an hour into the sky, and there was a slight salty smell coming in off the Pacific. A pleasant smell, especially for those used to living by the sea.

Enjoying breakfast with Pietro were his sister Wanda, daughter Luna and Bova, the bovine nursemaid, who lived at the bungalow and cared for Luna.

"Why haven't you put your name forth for Chairperson, Pietro?" Wanda asked, between bites of English muffin.

Pietro held a forkful of eggs in mid air, his mouth open to take a bite, his eyes on his sister. "M-me?" He set his fork back on his plate. "You know I care little for such things. Besides, I doubt the rest of the team would vote for me. I tend to be a bit, caustic at times. In case you haven't noticed." Pietro gave her a wry grin.

Wanda smirked back. "I've noticed you sell yourself short, brother."

Luna's eyebrows wrinkled in confusion. "What's 'kastic' mean, daddy?"

"Never you mind, young one." Bova chided gently. "Your father is a decent man."

Pietro smiled at Bova. "Your nursemaid wears rose-colored glasses, Luna. 'Caustic' means that some people find me hard to get along with."

"Not me, daddy!" Luna exclaimed. "You're my favorite daddy in the whole world!"

Those at the table shared a chuckle at Luna's comment. Pietro then turned to regard his sister again. "To answer your last statement Wanda, I doubt I sell myself short. I'm confident in my abilities, but I know my limitations as well. I would not make a good leader for this team."

"But what about you, Wanda?" Bova asked. "Weren't you once leader of this team? Not that my opinion counts, but if I may say, you would be a wonderful chairperson, if old Bova is any judge."

"Dear, sweet Bova!" Wanda exclaimed. "I think Pietro is right about those glasses. You've known us since we were babes, naturally you'd think the best of us. But I love you all the more for saying so."

"Still," Pietro commented, "What she says is true. You were a chairperson."

"For an extremely brief period, brother. And only, as it turned out, Iron Man's figurehead. At any rate, I have not rejoined this team. I'm here on an unexpectedly long visit. In fact, now that we've come to the topic, I was thinking of returning to Transia soon, to continue my magical training."

This caused Pietro to scowl, and he was about to open his mouth in protest, when suddenly a loud barking came from the opposite end of the porch. There stood Lockjaw, the Inhuman's dog blessed with the ability to teleport instantly

over great distances. With him was Pietro's wife Crystal, who was holding her belly while being supported by the third member of the group who had arrived, Crystal's cousin, the Inhuman queen Medusa.

"Crystal has cut her visit to Attilan short," said Medusa quickly, "because we believe she is in labor."

UCLA Medical Center

Jack Zimineck sat up in bed grinning to himself. He had survived the blast at his bank, somehow. *

* WCA #121

And he had power, he knew.

Anyone who had the misfortune of entering his room heard: "I've got power, yes indeed! Now, you'll be sorry! You'll *all* be sorry!" The doctors, nurses, orderlies all heard this. Even the psychologist they had sent in to evaluate him had to sit through this sort of tirade. The shrink had written an order for restraints to be put on Jack, fearing he could be a danger to himself, or others. Eventually Jack was moved to the psychiatric ward.

Jack laughed at the wrist restraints that secured his arms to the bed's siderails. He could escape from these anytime he wished. In fact, Jack decided he *would* escape. He was tired of staying here. Besides, Jack had things to take care of. Lots of people had failed him. The police hadn't come to rescue him from the bank robbers. The Avengers hadn't protected him. What were these people good for if they couldn't defend people from crime?

Jack felt the power well up inside of him. All of these authority figures had failed him. The system itself was corrupt, he reasoned. They would all have to be taught a lesson. And the lesson would begin now!

Bawooooom!

On the Medical Center's fifth floor, an entire room exploded in a ball of fire. Concrete and steel shrapnel rained down on the street and sidewalk below. As did other bits of flaming debris. A gaping hole smoked where Jack's room had once been.

Minutes later the body of Jack Zimineck coalesced on a rooftop across the street. He grinned at the destruction. Having been blown up by a bomb strapped to your chest gave you a certain appreciation for explosive carnage. Ah well, onto other business. Jack, now naked as the day he was born, his clothes having been burned up in the explosion, turned and left the scene.

Elsewhere.

The three Athenian heroes, armed with sword and shield, prepared to square off against their most hated enemy in the final battle.

"Now, fools, prepare to meet your doom!" the god Pluto shouted, pointing at the group of invading warriors. "And all shall know the...err..." the Greek god stuttered, "The..."

Suddenly, another figure stood up. With a seriously annoyed tone of voice, she shouted out toward the deity. "Cut!"

With arms crossed, Charlie walked onto the Hollywood set.

"And all shall know the folly of trifling with the gods" Charlie, director of the film quoted. "That's the third time, Simon. We really don't have the budget for too many retakes."

Wonder Man, in full Greek costume, looked sheepish. "Yeah, Charlie, I know. Sorry."

Charlie sighed. "Let's take ten."

Simon walked off stage and had a seat. He rubbed at his burning arm. The Ionic Avenger scowled at the wrist. It had continued to have a burning sensation ever since he had

returned from space, but today it had been especially bad. It was starting to affect his concentration, causing him to forget his lines and correct placement on the set. He could tell the other members of the cast and crew were starting to get a bit annoyed.

Charlie came over. "What's wrong with you today, Simon?"

Wonder Man shrugged. "I don't know, really. Feeling a bit under the weather today I guess.

Charlie blinked. "Is that possible for you?"

"Well..." Simon pondered it. He used to be immune to fatigue and illness, but he supposed his burning wrist could be some sort of bug. "I don't know. Anything is possible." He smiled at her. "I wouldn't worry about it, though. Whatever it is, it's minor. I'll be over it in a day or two."

"I hope so." Charlie said, not exactly reassured. "We'll wrap for today. Try again for tomorrow. Hope you're feeling better by then, Simon." She walked off to inform everyone else.

"Me too." Simon whispered.

Surgery

After three hours of labor, Physic Galen stood up, the new addition in his arms. "Congratulations." he said, regarding Crystal and Pietro. "You're the parents of a baby boy."

Pietro kissed Crystal on the forehead. "You have done well, my wife."

Crystal, worn out, but smiling nonetheless, said. "You sound like you're praising a dog."

Pietro gaped, struck speechless. He honestly couldn't tell if she were serious or not. Women in labor often lashed out at their husbands. But Crystal had already had the baby.

Crystal laughed at the look on his face. "Relax, I'm kidding you." She drew him close. "Let's hold our son."

Recovery Room

Later, several of the Avengers had gathered to see the new addition. Merveille, Living Lightning, Tigra, were there. Also present was the Inhuman Royal family. Black Bolt, Medusa, Gorgon and Karnak had arrived, to see the new addition to the extended family.

Currently, Monica Rambeau was holding the newborn child. He in turn held Monica's index finger tightly in his little fist. Monica made soft cooing noises at him.

"He's a beautiful boy," Tigra said, echoing similar statements made by everyone in the room. Except Black Bolt, that is, though Medusa informed them all that the King agreed with the sentiment.

"What are you going to name him?" asked Living Lightning.

"Well," Quicksilver said. "We really haven't decided. Honestly it's been a point of contention among my wife and myself. I would like to name him 'Django' after my one time foster father."

Noses all around the room wrinkled in disgust.

"See?" said Crystal, grinning smugly.

Pietro folded his arms, indignant. "I'll have you know it's considered a fine name in Transia."

"What about you, Crys" Wanda asked.

"Anything but 'Django', please!" Crystal laughed, causing Pietro to scowl further.

Medusa spoke up. "My husband believes that 'Blackagar' would be a fine name for the child." Blackagar, AKA Black Bolt looked smug.

No one in the room could tell if he was kidding or not. Most of the Avengers thought it a worse name than Django, but they didn't really think they should say it. Black Bolt was, after all, a king.

"Well," Medusa continued, "We must now take our leave. Black Bolt gives his congratulations and offers blessings on the new child. He takes comfort in the fact after the exodus of so many Inhumans, new ones have already begun to take their place."

Quicksilver frowned inwardly. He wasn't sure if liked the idea of the Royal family considering his new child to be an Inhuman. Crystal looked at him and smiled, squeezing his hand, but something in her look told Pietro that she guessed at what he was thinking. However, Pietro merely smiled and squeezed back.

With that, the Inhumans took their leave, as did the Avengers, leaving the parents with their new child.

Biochem Lab. Sub-basement One.

Ever since Quicksilver's operation, several days ago, the lab had been empty. After the operation, Yellowjacket and Reed Richards had left for the East Coast. Hank Pym had said that he would be back as soon as possible to investigate the drastic changes Ultron 2.2 had made, but Richards had made no promises.

In any event, no one currently on the West Coast team had any idea what to do with the room, so they left it alone until someone more scientifically inclined could investigate it.

Perhaps not such a good idea...

The room was not unoccupied.

A presence existed, or perhaps more than one. And they were hard at work. Hundreds of Ultron's 'bytes', secretly left behind by their master, were busy in the abandoned lab, further altering it for unknown purposes. They had in fact altered it beyond the ability of any mind on Earth, save perhaps Reed Richards or Doctor Doom to fully understand all of it's new purposes.

The bytes had also enhanced the lab's computer, cutting it off from the rest of the compound and making it another extension of their group consciousness. As the work continued, they had reinforced the doors to the lab, and set new combinations to the locks, sealing it off from anyone who might try to enter, even if any of the team had the inclination to try.

Thus, right under the nose of the Avengers, a small fortress existed, furthering the mad ambitions of an insane robot...

Meanwhile, in Siryn's Room.

Siryn sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the envelope that had just been delivered by Carlos, the Compound's butler. It was just a plain envelope, but as soon as Siryn had taken it, a sense of foreboding had come over her for some reason.

Now she sat in her room staring at it blankly, unopened. It was addressed merely to 'Theresa'. Nothing else was written on it. Finally, she mustered up the courage to open it. "Silly," she said to herself. "It's just a letter."

Unfolding the single sheet of paper inside, she began to read it. As she did, her face turned a pale white and her hands shook while reading. She let the note fall to the floor as she lay back on the bed, her hands covering her face.

The note lay on the floor where it fell. Anyone who came along could pick it up and read it. It said:

Theresa,

Please, I need you to come to San Francisco with all due haste.

An emergency has occurred that you should be aware of. I know I

have given you no reason to trust me, based upon my past conduct

in general and toward you. However, I implore you, for your

own

good, to give me another chance, and come to San Francisco. You won't regret it.

Sincerely,
Uncle Tom

End AWC #124

West Coast Lines

Send all email to: usagent@eudoramail.com

Welcome back. It's been, what, a year since the last issue? Oh well, I won't go into explanations or apologies. Such is the life of fanfiction in a shared universe. This time, I hope we stay on schedule for good. Cross your fingers.

This 'month's' letter comes from Peter Lin, writer of Dragons of the East here at MV1.

Hi Scooter!

I know it's been a while since we've spoke (as well as since I've contributed to the Knights branch), but I'm glad you're still putting out excellent work.

A few weeks ago, I thought USAgent #5 would be your most defining work to date, but I'm very very impressed when I say that AWC #123 probably sets the standard for all future Whacko scribes to follow.

Without missing a beat (I'm not a Whacko fan, but Lonni's excellent review compelled me to read the issue), you quickly bring any new readers up to date of the situation. The story flowed with perfect pacing, and the characterization was impeccable.

I especially liked the interactions between Wanda and Crystal. Don't ask me why, but sisters-in-law are rare (the only other pair I can think of are Psylocke and Meggan) in

the Marvel Universe, and anyone who can bring out the characterization well deserves a lot of praise.

The leaving of Jocasta is also reminiscent of many Avengers who have left the ranks over the years. However, your writing makes a rather regular event something to ponder about, without resorting to camp or clichéd lines.

But what I really liked most are the civilian thoughts of Variable, Living Lightning and Wonder Man. From a writer who finds it very difficult to pen down even the social life of my own creations, I'm greatly inspired by your style, and hope to emulate it one day.

All in all, a great read.

If I had a grading scheme, I'll give you 4 out of 5 Strings!

Yes, but can you play a guitar without that 5th string? Thanks for the letter, Pete. Hope things are well for you out there in Singapore.

Next Month: We change pace a little bit. The AWC have not been pleased by the recent actions of the PATRIOT CORPS, as seen in the pages of USAGENT. Things are gonna heat up quick when these two teams collide in... "Confrontations!"

AWC #125, by Scott Chamberlain

AWC #125, by Scott Chamberlain

MV1

COMICS

#125

Dec. Yr. 4

Quicksilver! Wonder Man! Scarlet Witch! Variable!



To combat those threats against which no hero could stand alone, Earth's Mightiest Heroes forged a covenant to unite in battle, to protect all mankind. Now, from a second base of operations, a new chapter in their legend is being written.

Scott Chamberlain presents... *Avengers West Coast!*

"Confrontations"

Writer: Scott Chamberlain

Images: Chris Luna, Scott Chamberlain

Branch Editor: Alex Cook

Long Island, New York. 1:17 AM, EDT

Quietly, the door to the warehouse slid open. Inside all was pitch black.

That didn't really matter to the Patriot Corps, however. USAgent and Super-Patriot were wearing state-of-the-art day vision goggles while Skylark and Tank had just recently had a day vision systems package downloaded into their respective armor.

Still, caution and silence were needed. They weren't supposed to be here. Even though the sign out front declared this to be one of those public storage units; where yuppies that had more stuff than they could ever possibly need or use, kept things; NSA intelligence suggested otherwise. At least according to Patriot Corps liaison Tamara Bunnell.

The real reason for this warehouse was why Patriot Corps had been sent here. An object needed retrieved, which if it fell into the wrong hands could cause quite a bit of trouble.

In theory, it was a rather simple grab and retrieve mission. Agent Bunnell had even said that it might be so easy no one would even get killed this time. The Corps got the joke, not that they thought it was funny.

The problem with theories though, is that sometimes they get blown to hell.

From either side of the entrance, troops in full-face masks and red berets rushed at the invaders with weapons firing.

"ULTIMATUM troops!" said USAgent. The day vision goggles had let them see the attackers just before they had started firing, allowing the Corps to take action. "Take them out! Skylark, lay down a gravity field."

Patriot Corps went into action. Bullets weren't much good against super-powered beings, in general and with Skylark's gravatic powers in effect, it wasn't long before the attackers were subdued.

"Alright," the Agent ordered, after securing the prisoners. "Spread out and find the lab."

The team went to work. The lab was soon found to be hidden behind walls, which were made to resemble towers of crates and boxes. Inside a trio of white lab-coated scientists was studying a brown and khaki costume, which lay on a table between them. Upon being discovered, one of them, a red-haired woman, made a feeble attempt at

making a grab for a pistol lying on a nearby table. Tank swiveled on his torso-mounted turret and pointed his energy blasters at the woman.

USAgent pointed a thick index finger at her. "Do it and Tank here will burn you down."

She thought better of it and retracted her hand.

"Good. Smart lady." The Agent regarded the other two scientists. "Step away from that table please, nobody has to get hurt."

The scientists complied. Agent went to the table and picked up the costume. Tamara Bunnell's voice crackled suddenly into the ear-mounted communicator USAgent wore. "Agent? Has the object been secured?"

How did she know, already? USAgent thought. "Yes, Agent Bunnell."

He took a hard look at the costume. "It's the Silencer suit, alright."

Avengers Compound, Palos Verdes California. 6 AM PDT.

When a priority communications alert goes off at the Compound, it means get your shirt on and hightail it over to the monitor room, pronto.

When said alert comes from Captain America, it means double quick.

So it was a bit odd that the monitor room didn't have the full compliment of currently active Avengers present for this particular alert, especially at this early hour. Present were Quicksilver, Wonder Man, Tigra, Scarlet Witch and Lady Merveille, who had been on monitor duty. Variable was off Compound at his own home. Conspicuous by her absence was Siryn, though nobody had thought of it just then.

On screen currently was in fact Captain America, who greeted everyone as they entered.

He smiled and addressed them. "Sorry to wake you, Whackos, I know it's still early over there, but I have some important news."

Cap looked at everyone he could see assembled on the screen in front of him. He frowned a bit. "Is that the whole team? I know Hawkeye had to leave*, but..."

* Last Issue -Scooter

Lady Merveille spoke up. "The Variable is on the way, we'll fill him in on whatever this is about when he gets here. I don't know where Siryn is presently, but we'll get her up to speed too. Go ahead."

Cap nodded. "Very well, Monica. First I want to send you a feed from SCN, about a break in of a warehouse on Long Island last night." Cap pushed a button and the video of an SCN reporter replaced Cap on screen.

The video was a report about the break in. The reporter interviewed police on the scene; a spokesman gave out information that several men in what appeared to be ULTIMATUM uniforms were found tied up in the warehouse. Also an empty laboratory. The policeman could neither confirm nor deny reports that a couple of the soldiers had identified Patriot Corps on the scene, though it was very possible that they were the ones who had broken up the operation. Also, the spokesman said there was no evidence the ULTIMATUM base had been used to construct weapons of mass destruction.

Cap shut off the video feed after that. He looked back at the Avengers. "These Patriot Corps, whoever they are, are starting to get out of hand. I've learned that after their overthrow of Ivekistan, the country's entire nuclear arsenal has turned up missing. And now they hit an ULTIMATUM base where weapons of mass destruction may have been produced?"

"The NSA has come to us, asking us to do something about them. They Agency told us that Patriot Corps has no standing with the US government whatsoever. Official or otherwise. I would have agreed to the mission, but Hawkeye and I have an agreement about this*. Since USAgent was one of your group, I'm handing the ball off to your team, if you want it."

* USAgent #5 --Scooter

The West Coasters looked at each other, nodding. Quicksilver spoke up for them. "The Agent was one of our own, Captain America, and we'll bring the Patriot Corps in."

Cap nodded to Pietro. "Good. If you want, I have an idea on how to track them down..."

Siryn's Room

Knock knock came the sound at the door.

"Siryn?"

The Scarlet Witch repeated the knock. "Theresa?" She said as she opened the door slightly and peered in.

The room was dark; all of the lights were turned out. Wanda didn't think this odd, it being still before 7AM. She flipped on the lights. Right away, Wanda noticed that Siryn's few belongings had been emptied out. Theresa was nowhere to be found.

Then Wanda noticed the note on the bed, folded up neatly. She picked it up, unfolded and read it.

Sorry I had to pick up and leave like this, but something serious has happened*. I have to go to San Francisco for a while. Hope you understand. I probably won't get the chance, but I'd like to serve with you all again someday.

It was unsigned.

* --See Last Issue

New Orleans

Monica looked at the sign on the small office space she had just rented out. She had made the sign herself. It read: 'Merveille, paranormal services for hire'. She hoped that people would understand what she meant by 'paranormal'. She would have been a bit embarrassed to put 'super-hero' on the sign. This being New Orleans however, she was afraid people would come wanting their palms read, or voodoo dolls made.

Her father had made an off handed comment a while ago about Heroes for Hire maybe looking for work.* Monica had taken the point that her father thought it was time for her to get out from under the failing boating business. However, she had no intention of going to New York and looking for a job with them, not when she was already going back and forth between LA and New Orleans all of the time. But setting up her own small operation here might just work. The extra money might help keep the family boating business afloat, no pun intended.

* AWC #115

Monica sighed. She just hoped she would be able to juggle the boating, the Avengers and this new enterprise.

A few days later, at Patriot Corps HQ.

The USAgent stood looking out the window of the debriefing room over Alexandria, Virginia. The other members of Patriot Corps sat in seats around the table. They all waited upon the arrival of Tamara Bunnell.

"What's taking so long," Skylark asked, swiping back an errant lock of her jet-black hair annoyedly. "She's kept us waiting here for over an hour."

USAgent shrugged, not looking away from the window. "She has her reasons, I'm sure."

"Of course I do, as always." Agent Bunnell replied, sweeping in through the door. She had a seat at the table and indicated the Agent do likewise with a gesture.

"I am sorry for keeping you all waiting," Bunnell said, looking directly at Skylark from behind her mirrored glasses. "But new intelligence has come into my hands. It's intelligence that is too good to just pass up."

Bunnell continued. "I'm afraid your mission to Wakanda is cancelled until further notice. You've got new orders." There was a collective groan, which died down quickly enough with a look from Bunnell. "Sources have revealed that a HYDRA boat posing as a legitimate cruise ship is en route from New York to Lisbon, Portugal. This ship, it has been learned, is carrying enriched uranium. What HYDRA plans to do with it is unknown, but clearly it can not be allowed to reach Lisbon. Your job is to intercept the ship and hold it until NSA agents can board it and secure the uranium."

"How long do we have until we go after this ship?" Super Patriot asked.

"The ship is over halfway to Lisbon already. You leave tomorrow morning."

USAgent grunted. "Not much time to prepare."

"Preparation has never been a guarantee," Bunnell replied. "You should know that by now. Just get the job done and head home. Dismissed."

Inside an Avengers quinjet, somewhere over Kansas

Small talk between those who were aboard the quinjet had so far been the order of the day since the team had flown out from the Compound toward their objective. Six Avengers were aboard the quinjet. Wonder Man, in the pilot's seat. Variable, in the co-pilot's seat, taking impromptu flying lessons from Simon. Quicksilver, Scarlet Witch, Tigra and Lady Merveille were in the passenger's compartment, chit chatting away.

In the middle of this, Wanda cleared her throat and got everyone's attention. "Excuse me, but since we're all together right now, I thought it might be a good idea to decide who our next chairperson is going to be. We never got around to choosing after Hawkeye left the other day."

The group spent a few moments looking at one another. Tigra spoke up first. "Well, Wanda, you brought it up. Who do you suggest?"

The Scarlet Witch shrugged. "For what it is worth, I think my brother would make a fine chairperson. He's been an Avenger a very long time. I believe he is ready for the leadership mantle."

Quicksilver grunted and scowled, but managed to look fondly at his sister when he spoke. "I appreciate that, Wanda I really do. However I think you overestimate me in this regard. Furthermore, I do not seek to become leader."

"I dunno, Pete," Wonder Man said. "I think Wanda may be more right than you care to admit."

Inwardly, Pietro seethed. Several weeks ago, he and Wonder Man had come to blows*. He really didn't want to hear Simon's opinion. Instead of retorting, however, he tried to deflect attention from himself. "What about you, Lady Merveille. You were a chairperson before. You have more experience at the job than anyone here."

* AWC #117

"That's true," Tigra agreed. "What do you say, Merv?"

Lady Merveille held out her hands to try and ward off the suggestion. "No, no, no... not me. Sorry, folks but I am just way too busy right now to take on another responsibility. I just can't do it."

Wonder Man glanced back into the compartment "What's gotcha so tied up, Merveille?"

Monica sighed inwardly. "It's just personal things. I don't want to go into it." The last thing she wanted was for any of her teammates knowing about her family's financial difficulties. She couldn't handle the pity, for one thing. For another, she didn't want them to think she was just here for the paycheck. At first, that was the primary reason, but now she was really starting to enjoy being part of the team and the camaraderie that went with it. She also kind of thought she liked the way that Simon had looked at her when he glanced back just now...

"Besides," Merveille went on. "I'm not the only one here who has served as a team leader before." She looked meaningfully at the Scarlet Witch.

Wanda took the point. "Ah, no, not me. I didn't want to speak up about this yet, but with Pietro and Crystal's new son now born, and having settled things with our father, more or less, I think it's about time I went back to Transia and continued my magical training. I'll stay on long enough to help with this mission, but then I'll take my leave. For now, anyway."

Things quieted down for a minute after this. Quicksilver's habitual frown reappeared and Simon looked straight ahead as he flew, dead silent.

The Variable was the one to finally break the silence. "I'll be sorry to see you go so soon after I joined, Ms. Maximoff. I hardly had a chance to get to know you." Wanda smiled appreciatively. "But after listening to everyone talk, I think Quicksilver is the best choice for the job. If my opinion matters, that is."

"Of course it does!" Wanda said, grinning widely at her brother. "And I agree!"

"I second that!" said Tigra.

"Sounds good to me." Lady Merveille chimed in, glad to have the attention off of her.

Wonder Man shrugged. "I'll go along with the consensus."

Quicksilver sank into his chair, annoyed yet also rather awed at this show of respect from his teammates. Suddenly, he knew he couldn't refuse them. "I said I do not seek to lead this team and I meant it. However, if you are all hell-bent on having me be chairperson, then I reluctantly accept."

"Hurray!" Wanda exclaimed and hugged her brother around the neck. A general sound of applause went up from the rest of the team.

Pietro raised a warning finger in the air. "However, if the proverbial you-know-what hits the fan under my watch, and we all end up dead, or worse... don't come complaining to me!"

The cruise ship *Portuguese Splendour* , at sea in the eastern Atlantic

"I've got the ship in sight." Skylark reported. The only female member of Patriot Corps was flying reconnaissance ahead of the Corps' StealthQuin, a modified Quinjet.

"Report?" USAgent asked, back in the StealthQuin's cockpit.

Skylark did a fly over. "I can see several people dressed in what looks like HYDRA uniforms. They appear to be armed, but only with small arms or possibly assault rifles. Nothing we shouldn't be able to handle."

"Good," USAgent replied. He pushed a button on the flight console. "The ship's transmissions should be jammed now. I'll set the StealthQuin to hover mode. Patriot Corps, get ready to board!"

Less than a minute later, the four-person Patriot Corps team landed on Portuguese Splendour's front deck.

"This is Patriot Corps!" USAgent shouted the announcement to the HYDRA troops on deck. "Lay down

your arms, now, and no one has to get hurt!"

One of the HYDRA soldiers strode forward. He looked directly at USAgent. "I'm sorry, but that's just not going to work." The trooper grabbed at his green and yellow mask and pulled it off. Underneath was a man with white hair and a frank scowl on his face. "It's you who has to surrender, USAgent. You've got a lot of explaining to do."

"Quicksilver!" USAgent exclaimed in surprise. Around the Patriot Corps, other 'HYDRA' troops were pulling off their masks. Wonder Man, Tigra, Lady Merveille, Scarlet Witch and Variable all took up flanking positions.

"The Avengers!" Super Patriot said, trying to look in every direction at once. "It's a trap!"

"Boy, nothing gets past you 'Muscles', does it?" Tigra asked, leaping cat-like onto Super Patriot's back and pounded him on the head.

"No!" Quicksilver shouted. "Tigra! Not ye.."

The blows bounced off Super Patriot ineffectively. "Yeah, well kitty cat," he replied, grabbing a handful of fur. "I 'grab on' pretty quick." The Patriot lifted Tigra over his head, single handedly and threw her over the side of the ship.

As Greer raced toward the water, a cat's instinct reared its head. "No! I don't want to get wwwweeeeeeeeeeeeeet.....!"

Splash!

USAgent grimaced. He didn't want a fight with the Avengers. Like them or not, they were fighting on the right side of the law. He looked at Quicksilver. "We've got no beef with you, Avengers. We only came here because we wanted to stop a HYDRA shipment of enriched uranium. Obviously a set up, but what you have to realize is that we're working on the same side."

"Enough." Quicksilver replied. "You call unsanctioned support of rebel insurgents 'working on the same side'?"

What did you do with Ivekistan's nuclear arsenal? What about the chemical weapons at that ULTIMATUM base you raided? You're not working for the government. You and your team stand down, now or the Avengers will stand you down!"

USAgent shook his head. "Sorry, Quicksilver. We aren't being taken in. We are working for the government, you Avengers simply don't have the clearance to know what we're doing. As for nuclear and chemical weapons, I have no idea what you're talking about. Patriot Corps, defend yourselves!"

Avengers Compound, Palos Verdes

In a bedroom of Quicksilver and Crystal's bungalow, a cow rocked a baby to sleep. If you're new to Avengers West Coast, you're probably raising an eyebrow at that last statement. Stick around, you'll catch on.

"Rock a bye baby, in the treetops..."

"When the wind blows, the cradle will rock..."

Just then, Crystal peeked into the room. She grinned at her child and his nursemaid.

"Bova," she whispered, trying not to disturb her baby, who was almost asleep. "You haven't lost your touch. You're still wonderful with children."

The cow-woman smiled, laying the infant in his cradle. Now asleep, the newborn merely sucked his thumb and ignored everything else.

Outside the nursery, Bova replied. "It's just the love I have for children. It warms my heart so to be able to take care of the children of people who were once also children I took care of, if you take my meaning."

"I do." Crystal patted her hand. They went to the kitchen together. "Let's have tea."

"Wonderful," Bova agreed. She looked at Crystal. "Have you thought of a name, yet?"

Crystal sighed, entering the kitchen. She sat as Bova filled a kettle and set it on the stove. "Not yet. Pietro and I simply can't agree on anything."

Bova nodded, sitting across the table. "If I may make a suggestion... In Transia it is a very common custom to name one's firstborn son after his father..."

Crystal stared at Bova. "Hum.... Why, it's so obvious... Why didn't I think of it before? Bova, you're brilliant!"

The Portuguese Splendour

"Avengers Assemble!" Quicksilver called out for the first time as West Coast chairman. The speedster sailed in at USAgent, raining a flurry of blows at his opponent.

The Agent, letting his vibranium alloy shield take the brunt of the attack, tried reasoning. "You're making a mistake, Quicksilver. Just because you aren't cleared to know about our activities, doesn't mean they aren't legitimate."

Quicksilver sped around the Agent in ever quickening circles, looking for an opening to attack. "Fool! The NSA came to the Avengers asking us to detain and bring in Patriot Corps!"

"That's ridiculous!" The Agent replied, trying to keep his shield between himself and Quicksilver, an act that was becoming increasingly more difficult as the mutant sped up. "We work for the NSA!"

Nearby, Wonder Man had just plowed into Super Patriot, who had gone skittering across the deck. "Care to try what you did to Tigra on me, Supes?"

Super Patriot got up, rubbed his jaw, and smiled. "Been hoping you'd ask, Wonder Man. Don't like you very much. Getting tired of the Agent always comparing my strength to

yours during training sessions. Figure we ought to settle which one of us is stronger right now. Last man standing... wins."

"You're on." Wonder Man agreed. But he gave a slight nod to the Variable, who was creeping in behind Super Patriot.

For his part, the Variable was concentrating, willing a power to come to him. It worked; something did come to him. Suddenly, he began to float off of the deck of the ship. "Uh..." he said as he continued to float away. He noticed that his hands and body were becoming translucent. Suddenly the Variable had an idea. "Hey, this is kinda like what the Vision does." He tried floating over the top of Super Patriot, then willed his density to increase. Suddenly he dropped like an anvil.

Below, Wonder Man had closed in with Super Patriot directly after seeing that whatever the Variable had planned had gone awry. It was then the Variable came crashing down. Not only atop Super Patriot but Wonder Man as well. Unfortunately, the Variable had shifted his density too much. Not only did he crash atop the pair, but crashed straight through the deck and punched through several others, taking Wondy and Supes with him.

At the start, Skylark had taken immediately to flight, being closely pursued by Lady Merveille. Skylark's gravity fields were proving to be of little effect against Merveille's energy forms, so she had spent most of her time dodging various attacks. So far, she had managed to avoid most of them, but one had hit, shorting out some of her armor's systems. The armor was in the process of rebooting those systems through secondary connections.

Back on deck, the Scarlet Witch was busy dodging herself, being fired on by Tank's energy cannons. She took cover wherever she could find it, hoping for an opening where she

could cast a hex sphere. Tank hadn't given her the chance so far, laying down a steady suppression fire.

"C'mon, Witchy-poo!" Tank taunted. "I've got my cannons set on stun. They won't kill you, they'll just hurt *real* bad!"

Well, that's comforting. Wanda thought. "Merveille!" she yelled, seeing Monica swoop by in pursuit. "Help, for God's sake!"

"Not a problem," Lady Merveille answered, turning into laser energy and firing herself at Tank. "Help's on the way!"

Tank teetered from the force of the blow, but he managed to stay upright. He returned fire as Merveille sped away again, but his guidance systems were no match for the Avengers sheer speed and all his shots missed widely.

Wanda got the chance she was looking for, and cast her hex sphere. Immediately, Tank's cannons stopped firing. "Crap!" he yelled, trying in vain to get the guns unjammed.

At that time, Tigra managed to finally climb back aboard the ship. She spat seawater out of her mouth and generally looked like a wet, bedraggled mess. "Oh... I hate water..."

Suddenly, Wanda felt as if 300 pounds of weight were strapped to her back. She collapsed to the deck. Skylark landed, straddling the Witch, whom she grabbed by the cape and prepared to put out of the fight with a finishing punch.

Tigra came out of no where, bowling into Skylark as both went careening off across the deck. Skylark reversed her gravity field, sending Tigra sailing off and away from her. "Get off of me! You smell like wet cat!"

BOOM!

Tigra wasn't the only thing sailing. Out from the hole in the deck came Wonder Man with the Variable clutching for dear life at his leg. Super Patriot clambered out soon after,

snarling and looking for more trouble. "Who wants some? Bring it on!"

USAgent meanwhile was still trying to fend off Quicksilver's attacks. He had managed to actually stagger his opponent with a lucky glancing blow at one point, but it had only infuriated Quicksilver and caused him to redouble his efforts. However the Agent had used the brief pause to use a remote to summon the StealthQuin, which now hovered above the deck.

This battle is not going well. The Agent thought. We're holding our own, but we're outnumbered and out-experienced by the Avengers. To buy time, the Agent threw his shield at Quicksilver. A risky gamble, but it bought him another few seconds as Pietro dodged. "Patriot Corps! Form up on me, we're getting out of here!"

As he caught his shield, he looked up at Skylark, now flying above him. "Get us up to the StealthQuin, if you don't mind, Sky."

"Will do, Boss." Skylark replied. She threw out a gravity field around her teammates, carrying them all off the deck and toward the jet.

"Sorry, Avengers," USAgent called back as they moved away. "But this is a pointless battle, and we've got better things to do. Maybe we'll meet up again sometime. Under better circumstances."

"Not likely!" Wonder Man shouted back. "You're not getting away so easily, Agent." He took off and thundered after them. In his hand he palmed an object he had brought along for just such a situation as this.

The Patriot Corps were already aboard, however and the StealthQuin began jetting away from the battle. Wondy threw the object at the jet in desperation, already being left behind.

Lady Merveille streaked past Wonder Man however, able to keep up easily with the quarry.

Aboard the StealthQuin, USAgent engaged the drive that gave the craft its name. "Going to Stealth Mode. Goodbye, Lady Merveille."

Outside, Lady Merveille stared in disbelief as the StealthQuin simply disappeared. Patriot Corps had made good their escape.

Shortly

Quicksilver seethed, pacing back and forth aboard the Quinjet passenger compartment. "I can't believe we let them get away! We're going to look like fools. Captain America entrusted this mission to us, and we came up with nothing."

Back at the pilot's seat, Wonder Man spoke up. Well, I wouldn't say that exactly."

Pietro raised an eyebrow at him. "Explain what you mean, Simon."

"I mean that we might have a way to locate where Patriot Corps went to. Before we left the Compound, I had an idea to go down to Hawkeye's workshop in the sub-basement and pick up one of his arrowheads. I thought it might come in handy."

Pietro was getting impatient. "What *kind* of arrowhead...!"

Simon grinned. "A tracker head. I think I managed to get it onto their jet. If I did, when we get back to the Compound, we can track where they went after they got away."

Quicksilver nodded. "Great thinking, Simon. We don't need to go back to the Compound though. We should be able to track the signal from Avengers Mansion. Get us to New York as fast as possible!"

To be continued in USAgent #7

End AWC #125

West Coast Lines

Send all email to usagent@eudoramail.com

'Lines' will return next month. For now, a special treat:

Bonus 125th Issue Backup Story Special!

in...

"Tijuana Tourists!"

By Scott Chamberlain

November, Year 4

Tijuana, Mexico

The Avenida Revolucion has a well-deserved reputation as being 'The World's Most Shopped Street'. Stretching eight blocks from the border with the United States, the Revolucion is chock full of stores, stalls, arcades and underground passageways filled with bargains from all over the world.

The atmosphere on 'The Street' is always hustle in high gear, and today was no different. The finest and most expensive shops casually rubbed elbows with swindlers hawking cheap knock-off Rolexes and Indian women selling trinkets from sidewalk blankets. As such, the Revolucion was easily dismissed as a tourist trap, but to do so was to ignore the fact that it was truly a place for the discerning shopper to find rare commodities at bargain prices.

"Pffff...!" said Quicksilver, disgustedly. "This place is a cheap tourist trap!"

Crystal, arm in arm with her husband, chuckled at him. "Oh, don't be such a killjoy. We're supposed to be having a nice, relaxing day away from the Compound, remember?"

"Yes," Pietro agreed. "Still, why come to Tijuana?"

"Because it's three hours away from Avengers and supervillains and world-ending crises, that's why." Crystal looked around, taking it all in. "Besides I like it here. It's got flavor and atmosphere. This is what I think of when I think of

Mexico. It makes me feel like we're hundreds of miles from America, not just a couple of blocks. Try and get in the mood, will you?" She playfully punched him on the arm.

Pietro shrugged and smiled. "You're right. Plus this is the first time you and I have been alone together since, well, I don't remember when. Still I worry about Bova and the children."

"Right." Crystal said, sarcastically. "Bova is more capable of taking care of children than even we are. So why don't we get into the spirit of things and act like tourists?" She spied a nearby sidewalk vendor, selling inexpensive jewelry. "Ooh! Let's go there. Be a good husband and buy me something, will you?"

The vendor had spotted them first, and seeing a likely target, was soon haranguing Pietro with 'special deals' and low prices 'just because he thought they were a nice looking couple'.

Pietro was eyeing a gold necklace with a diamond pendant. This didn't escape the vendor's notice. "Ah, Senor! I'm thinking you would like to see your lady wearing that, no?" Pietro frowned, but said nothing.

"As it happens," the vendor continued, "That particular necklace is on sale this week. I can offer you a sweet price on it, Senor."

"Yes, I'm sure you could." Pietro said dryly. He noticed Crystal already trying on the necklace and sighed. "Well... how much?"

The vendor's price had made Pietro wince, but Crystal seemed to like the necklace, so he had bought it, after a bit of haggling. They were just about to move on their way when the vendor caught their attention with something else.

"Excuse me, Senor, but I think I have something else you might personally be interested in."

Pietro was about to inform the man that he was not personally into wearing affectations, but the object the vendor was holding up caught his eye. It was large men's silver ring adorned with a bright blue gem, which sparkled, possibly a star sapphire. Pietro couldn't take his eyes off of it, for some reason.

Crystal wrinkled her nose at it. "Kind of gaudy, if you ask me. It doesn't suit you, Pietro."

Ignoring the comment, Pietro asked, "How much?"

The vendor shrugged. "Not to disagree with your wife, but I think it is very good for you indeed. I like you so it is yours, no charge. I've had it in my inventory for years now anyway. Nobody buys it. I'm tired of keeping it around. You have it."

Pietro gave the man a suspicious look. He studied the ring intently. There was something about it... After a moment he nodded to the vendor. "Very gracious of you. I think I will take it." They took their leave then and moved on.

Later

Pietro and Crystal were seated for a late lunch at the Buenos Aires, an Argentinean restaurant not far from the Avenida Revolucion. Since they arrived, Pietro had studied the ring further. It truly was not a fine piece of workmanship, nor was the star sapphire really that valuable a gem. So, why had he wanted it so much?

"Pietro Maximoff, if you don't stop looking at that ring and pay attention to me, I'm going to make you give it back to that vendor!"

Pietro blinked and looked up at his wife. "I'm sorry," he said, placing the ring in a pocket. "Let's order something, shall we?" They picked up their menus and browsed.

Minutes later, however, the ring was on Pietro's finger, unnoticed by anyone.

The End...?